

DAN FANTE



SPITTING OFF TALL BUILDINGS

"A TRULY GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL." —SCOTLAND ON SUNDAY

A NOVEL

BY THE AUTHOR OF 86'D AND CHUMP CHANGE

P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

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A Novel

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 HarperCollins e-books

*For my mother, Joyce Smart Fante: poet, editor, and for almost fifty years
the wife of one of the most impossible, magnificent sons-of-bitches who ever
lived. With love, Ma. With love.*

‘There are no lies but the lies that are stuffed in the mouth of the hard-
knuckled hand of need, the cold iron fist of necessity...’

—TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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Chapter One

I GOT MY first job in New York City two days after I arrived. Monday. It'd taken me four days to hitchhike from L.A. I became a staple puller at an advertising company that did effectiveness studies for TV commercials. Clerical Assistant.

270 Madison Avenue. Third Floor. Schwermann Research, Inc. The gig came through an office temp place that advertised in the want-ads in the *New York Times*.

At eight-thirty that morning I began asking people on the street near Penn Station the way to get to Olson's Temp at Forty-second and Sixth. The second guy I asked gave me directions by bus. I walked to save the carfare. It was ten blocks.

Ms. Herrera, the placement counselor, never looked up when she called my name and I got to her desk. She had lots of black make-up above her eyes and there were no apparent breasts behind her shirt. I was handed a pen, a clipboard and a long double-sided application. I sat down with the form and did what I do most of the time with job applications - make shit up. It's a game I play to balance out the boredom and stupidity of having to spend time filling out forms and waiting endlessly in lines at employment agencies. I invent two or three companies where I've worked and say they have moved or gone broke. I use that as my 'Reason For Leaving Last Position.' It usually works and it eliminates the discussion of whether I was a good employee or not. The challenge comes when the agency person behind the desk asks stuff about my work history and I have to remember the sequence of what I wrote down on the application. If I've been drinking, concentrating and recalling my lies can be difficult.

Herrera saw that I'd completed all the blanks and boxes on both sides of the page and that I could spell and appeared to be alert so she gave me a quick pitch about how Olson's charges their client companies and pays their people. Then she looked down on my form at the 'Last Job' section where I'd filled in 'File Clerk/Counter Assistant.' It was fairly easy for me to read my own upside-down printing.

‘Seagram’s Music Supply,’ she hissed through her teeth. ‘That was clerical?’

‘Mostly,’ I said back. ‘I worked the register too when we got busy.’

‘You left because...?’

‘I wrote it down. It’s there on the form.’

‘I said, reason for leaving?’

‘Business relocation. They moved.’

‘To where?’

‘Elsewhere. Washington State, I believe. That’s there too.’

‘Before that, you worked...where?’

‘Daniels’ Press. It’s there.’

‘How long have you lived in New York, Mister Dante?’

‘Two days. I’ve relocated too.’

Herrera was tall and thin and oozed silent business pressure hysteria. I could tell that she regarded me and the rest of the flesh that moved through her cubicle as a hacker in a slaughterhouse might, making his cut, tallying the slabs on the moving hooks as they passed. It was okay with me.

Ms. Herrera signed something on the bottom and checked off a box. She had nicotine stains on her big fingers and one of her stick-on fake nails was missing off the thumb of her writing hand. Opening up a 3 X 5 card box labeled ‘Clerical,’ she hurried along the tabs until she came up with an assignment she must have regarded as suitable, then copied the information onto a three-part 8 X 10 form. Over my shoulder I saw that more people had filled her ‘Applicant’ bench against the wall. Five or six new bodies to be expedited. More meat. Every time a new one sat down Herrera gave a low grunt and made a pissed-off face.

Suddenly we were done. She tore off the top copy of the form with the job on it, stood up and handed it to me. Interview over. I asked about directions to get to the assignment on Madison Avenue. Herrera shook her skinny face from side to side as if to say, ‘Why am I the one who gets all the dazed, cheesedick out-of-town fucks off the street to waste my time?’ She jerked her chair back from the desk and stomped down the aisle to the front door that faced Forty-second Street. I followed.

Outside on the street she lit up a Newport, sucked in a huge hit, then pointed east toward Fifth Avenue. ‘Walk that way,’ she said, still holding most of the smoke in. ‘That’s east. Got it?’

I nodded and watched her exhale.

‘The second light is Madison. Turn right at Madison. That’s south. Two-seventy Madison is on the right side. Take the elevator to the tenth floor. Ten. You can remember that. Ten. The address is there on the paper I gave you. If you have any more questions, consult the information on your placement form. I’d provide you with a detailed color-coded map with arrows and circles and little stick men except I’ve got five more “clients” to see on my bench right now. I’m not a tour guide.’

‘Can I bum a cigarette?’

She made another face then dug into the pocket of her skirt, producing a pack, handing me one. ‘Anything else?’

I had matches. I lit it myself. ‘I’m not trying to be funny. Which way’s the Empire State Building? I’ve never seen it.’

Herrera yanked the door open, sucked in a last drag on her Newport, started to go in, got interrupted by a thought, then stopped suddenly and turned back. ‘Let me see your copy of the placement form again,’ she demanded.

I dug in my pocket and handed it back.

‘Crap! Jesus! I forgot to write her name down...Ask for Nancy. You have to ask for Nancy.’

‘Okay.’

‘Can you remember? It’s not on the job order. You’d better write it down!’

‘Nancy. I ask for Nancy. I’ll remember. I knew a Nancy once. Her whole name was Fat Nancy.’

Herrera’s eyes rolled, she turned, flicking her cigarette toward the street, exhaled a deep sigh, then went back inside. The door sucked closed behind her.

My hourly pay was \$8.

Having a job provided the money for me to move to a better place. I wasn’t sleeping because of my yakking brain and the constant break-ins and the flimsy locks on the room doors at the Thirty-fourth Street YMCA. I’d been paying twenty-two bucks a night plus tax. I’d walk to the bathroom to take a squirt and have to watch buttfucking in the communal showers.

The weekly rent for a single room in the rooming house I moved to on Fifty-first Street was \$150. That left about seventy-five dollars each week

after taxes to go toward other expenses. In the new place the bathroom was down the hall too but it was a one-person deal with the added amenity of a locking door.

For fourteen consecutive days after my first day at Schwermann, the thumb and the first finger on my right hand were red and blistered from using a mechanical staple-puller gadget that pinched my skin. At lunch break on my last Friday at the job I had shooters, beer back and bar pretzels with one of my temp co-workers, an actor named Brad O'Sullivan. Brad's spot at the job was the next area down from me in the windowless file storage room at Schwermann. His assignment was to separate the reports after I'd pulled the staples and taken the report covers off. There was George too. He was one down from Brad. George went from tab to tab in the reports counting the numbers of felt marker marks in the boxes and recording the data.

Me and Brad drank and ate pretzels and did some math on a bar napkin. Between the two of us we'd torn apart about fifteen hundred reports. I held up the hand and showed him the blister on my thumb. Brad shook his head. By the time we were headed back from our lunch break, I'd decided fuck it.

Herrera at Olson's Temp acted uninterested about me quitting Schwermann when I called her the next Monday morning. But then she began asking questions about what my boss had said when I said I was leaving. What I said. What Nancy had said back. That shit. I had to sell Herrera, convince her that I hadn't been petulant or acted like an asshole, in order for her to trust me and send me out again.

While we talked on the phone she looked up my file. I'd come in on time every day except for a couple of times. She saw that there had been no supervisor complaints. After the interrogation it was determined that I would be eligible for reassignment.

I could hear her wheezing while she fidgeted through the files on her desk. 'Okay, now I remember you,' she gasped. 'Dante! New in town. Right?'

'Right.'

‘Still here, Dante? Still lost?’

‘Still here.’

‘That’s just swell, Dante,’ she said. ‘What I’ll do is go over the list of the new phone-in assignments that’ve come in. I do it once a day for each of our people calling in for reassignment. Once only. When you call in remember that. If you like something say “Stop” and I’ll stop while you write it down. I don’t go back once I’ve read off a job. Got a pencil?’

‘A pen. I’m ready.’

‘Remember, Dante, say “Stop.”’

‘Okay.’

She started reading the alphabetical list. Most of what she had sounded okay but not more than a couple of notches above the staple-puller deal.

‘Arcade Ticket Taker, Auditor’s Assistant/Collator, Assembler’s Helper.’

‘Keep going,’ I said.

The ‘Cs’ ‘Ds’ and ‘Fs’ weren’t much better; ‘Car Detailer, Dish Washer, Cook’s Helper, Fill-in Delivery Man. Fitter Assistant, Flyer Distributor.’

‘Well?’

‘Keep going.’

‘Garage Attendant, Label Sticker/Packager, Loading Dock Clerk...’

By the ‘Ss’ I could tell that Herrera was out of patience. ‘Survey Taker, Supply Room Stock Man...C’mon Dante,’ she said, ‘my gum surgery was more fun than this.’

She started on the ‘Us’. ‘Usher.’

I knew immediately. ‘I’ll take Usher,’ I said. ‘Theater usher?’

‘Movie usher.’

‘I’ll take it.’

She gave me the location and the name of the person to see. She waited, wheezing, tapping the phone with her pencil, while I wrote down her directions on how to get there by subway. The manager’s name was Mrs. Lupo. An Italian name. I was optimistic.

Herrera surprised me by saying something conversational. ‘So, Dante,’ she hissed, ‘did you get to the Empire State Building?’

‘I was a block away on one of my lunch breaks but I didn’t go in.’

‘Soo...what’d you think?’

‘Tall...I thought it was tall.’

There was a click on the other end.

Chapter Two

I'D BEEN DRUNK most of the weekend for no reason other than boredom. Beer and wine. I like to walk sometimes when I'm drunk, especially when I'm in a new place. So I walked on Saturday. Uptown on Riverside Drive next to the frozen Hudson River. Up to Grant's Tomb. Then down Broadway. Buying brown-bag short dogs of Triple Jack wine, stopping at the newsstands and used book stores. Paperbacks, three for a buck. Passed the Ansonia Hotel, Seventy-second Street, Lincoln Center.

On Sunday I was awake hours before sunrise. I tried to write before I drank, working on my play, then gave up and hit the wine to stop the head noise. I ordered eggs and toast when the luncheonette on Eighth Avenue opened. The waitress had the name tag LaVonne. Friendly. Pretty, even white teeth.

After that I drank some more in my room and read my 'new' used Hubert Selby until I couldn't concentrate. Then I walked down Eighth Avenue. In Greenwich Village I passed chic outdoor cafés and people getting out of limos. It reminded me of L.A. and Beverly Hills so I turned west toward the docks and found a coffee house bookstore. A rummie with a ponytail was playing chess by himself. He had no cigarettes but he had a philosophy degree from NYU and said Edna Millay once lived on Hudson Street, e. e. cummings on West Fourth. He went on about dead Jesus until I got him off it and then about a trip he'd made to Alaska. What me and the rummie had in common is that we both had done a lot of walking. I bought us coffee and he pulled the cigarettes out of my pack one after the other and smoked them. When I left him I found Hudson Street but I never found Millay's house.

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light.

I arrived late that Monday afternoon for my first day at the Loew's Sheridan Movie - filling in for a man named Guido who was in Palermo for four weeks because his father died. I looked forward to the job because I always liked movies and because of the dark and the imaginary world and the smell of popcorn.

Herrera had told me that Mrs. Lupo was an old lady but a good client. Herrera'd said that she was 'funny' and 'moody.' A stickler.

The minute I saw Mrs. Lupo I knew that nobody in the theater but her could be the boss. She was small, under five feet and weighing less than ninety pounds. Her hair was pure white and she wore slacks and noiseless soft-soled black nurse's shoes and she had an intense, bosslike, rat face. I pegged her immediately as a stalker. She was way past retirement age but it was evident from watching her that she could out-speed-walk any employee in her theater.

She had me follow her to the unheated men's dressing area in the movie theater basement and pointed to a rack where there were white shirts and clip-on bow ties and parts of ten or fifteen beat-up old tuxedos. Lupo told me that when she was a girl first starting out as a vaudeville usher, Georgie Jessel had once changed his clothes in this very clammy, shitty, cold basement.

The black pants and jackets hung worn and shapeless like the abandoned uniforms of a defeated platoon of head waiters. Mrs. Lupo stayed outside the door while I tried on pants and tux jacket pieces until I was finally able to merge a combination that came close to my size.

When I opened the door of the dressing area, she looked me up and down, sucked at her teeth, then announced, 'That'll do. You're responsible for the cleaning. That and the shirt laundering come out of your pocket. Personal expenses.'

Then she walked over to the clothes rack, grabbed the first two available beat-up tux shirts and passed them to me. 'These'll be yours. There's a Chinese on the corner of Seventh Avenue. They charge a dollar a shirt. Don't get the heavy starch, get light starch only.'

Then she snatched off a frayed, dirty, clip-on bow tie that swung from the triangle of a wire hanger with half a dozen others and tossed it to me. 'You need this too,' she said, looking me up and down again. 'That's it,' she

declared to herself. 'You're done. Let's go. Change back into your street clothes. I'll wait.'

I did. But when I came out carrying the usher's uniform over my arm I hadn't tried on the shirts. I held one up. 'I can tell that these sleeves are too long,' I said. 'They won't fit.'

Her eyes shone with haughty amusement. 'We're not auditioning here, Dante. We do the best we can. You wear the jacket over the shirt, right? Roll the sleeves up if you have to. Remember, I said heavy starch destroys the cotton. No heavy starch.'

'You saying it twice has created a permanent impression.'

She didn't like my remark. She made a squinty face that caused a whole section of her brittle wrinkles to roll and fold quickly, then even out. 'And don't wear any one shirt more than three shifts maximum. Understand?'

'Absolutely.'

'Smelling like a dock worker or having a shoddy appearance is grounds at my theater. And don't be late anymore. Being late after the first time is also grounds.'

'Got it.'

'And not doing what your supervisor tells you is grounds too. Immediate grounds. Your supervisor is Eddy, my nephew.'

'You're not my supervisor?'

'Congregating with other employees and talking to women customers, except to answer questions, is out. You a sissy?'

'No.'

'This is a movie house in Greenwich Village, not a discotheque for my employees to hobnob with chippies and the local hippie weirdos. This is a place of business. You smoke?'

'Yes.'

'You smoke on your own time. Smoking downstairs in the alcove outside the bathroom or sneaking in back of the curtains by the inside exit doors and having a cigarette is also grounds. Eddy knows. Smoke on your break only. Smoke outside only. Understand?'

I exhaled heavily. 'I believe I do.'

'Don't be smart. Yes or no is the answer.'

'Okay, yes.'

‘So you’re up to speed so far?’

‘Twelve thousand percent.’

She went on. ‘Stay away from the projection booth upstairs. The night man is union. He’s a dope smoker and a drunk but there’s nothing we can do until we catch him. His contract states that he’s entitled to lock the booth door but he’s not fooling me. I won’t tolerate juicers or pot heads.’

‘Sounds good.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘I mind my own business.’

‘You start tomorrow, Dante. Your work schedule will be four to twelve with Mondays off. Ask for my nephew Eddy, the Assistant Manager. He’ll train you.’

‘What was today?’

‘Today was your interview.’

‘I thought today was my first day. Does that mean I’m not getting paid for today?’

‘Today was not your first day. You’re not working today. Eddy is off. Tomorrow is your first day. Today is Monday. Tomorrow is Tuesday.’

‘I was told by Miss Herrera at Olson’s to report for work today. Monday. Four p.m. I know the days of the week. Yesterday was Sunday, today is Monday.’

‘I just said that you have Mondays off.’

‘So what I was told by Herrera at Olson’s was bunk. No matter that my pay checks come from her.’

I’d pissed Mrs. Lupo off. She began gesturing. Her spiderweb wrinkles flexed and relaxed then tightened again. ‘Hand those here, please,’ she snapped, grabbing at the clothes.

I gave her the uniform, the shirts and the bow tie.

‘I haven’t got time for this,’ she said. Then she dumped the clothes on the dressing-room table in a heap and pulled the cord turning off the light.

‘Look. Okay,’ I said, surprised, squinting in the blackness. ‘I’ll be here tomorrow.’

Mrs. Lupo didn’t answer. The darkness had covered her exit. I turned and caught sight of her making her way up the first few flower-carpeted stairs twenty feet away. ‘Hey, okay,’ I called again. ‘I’ll be here.’

She paused, turned back in my direction: 'Three p.m. sharp. Tomorrow. Tuesday, Mr. Dante. You don't work on Monday. Monday is your off day. Take the uniform with you.'

'Right. I know about Monday.'

Her voice was echoing in the basement like the announcer at Shea Stadium. 'Report to Eddy. After the first week, if he thinks you've got promise he'll make a recommendation to me. I decide whether to put you on full time. I call the temp company.' Then she bellowed, 'Understood?'

'Okay,' I yelled back.

Her dark eyes met mine from the staircase. 'Dante's an Italian name. You're Italian?'

'On my father's side.'

'Northern Italian?'

'Half Italian.'

She assembled a small, pleated, triumphant smile. 'Go home. Be here tomorrow.' Then she spun around and I watched as she bounced up the rest of the carpeted stairs. An ancient gymnast in spy shoes.

Chapter Three

THE NEXT DAY I arrived late again at almost three-thirty because I got up with a hangover and then forgot to bring Herrera's subway instructions and came off the train at an express stop instead of exiting at the Twelfth Street station. I had to walk back from West Fourth Street. The attendant guy at the Times Square booth had told me the wrong train to get on. In New York the booth guys at the subway don't give a rat's dick because they'll never see you again so, when they're not sure about an answer to a question on which train to take to get somewhere, they give out bunk directions. Doing it they get a little cheap thrill.

There had been no sleep all that night because of the swarming in my brain. I'd drunk several beers and a bottle of Nyquil then read for hours but my interior brain foam could not be silenced. Around dawn, as one roomer after another ran the hot shower water through the rattling pipes and opened and shut the clanking bathroom door in the hall, I tried writing on my play, hoping it would help. Working now on Act I, Scene iii. I typed non-stop for two hours. Afterward, exhausted, I still couldn't sleep so I dressed and went out, ate breakfast at the diner where I found out LaVonne worked the afternoon and night shift, then returned to my room. I read what I'd written on the play, hated it, tore it to shithell then fell asleep in a chair about eleven o'clock.

In the men's changing area in the theater basement I got into my roll-up white shirt, bow tie and tux, then went upstairs and asked around the other staff until someone pointed out Eddy the Assistant Manager outside on the sidewalk smoking cigarettes, conversing with a neighborhood guy.

He was taller than his wrinkled, rat-faced aunt; big-nosed and witless. When he saw me coming he intentionally turned his back. I realized he'd identified my tux and had simply chosen to stiff me.

Waiting there looking at his back, I allowed myself to stand like a fool for half a minute or more, being dipped in the conversation piss of him and

the street guy. When I felt the knot of anger in my stomach ready to pop, I interrupted. 'Hey, excuse me,' I said. 'Are you Eddy?'

He twisted his face, then looked at me. Because the neighborhood guy was his audience and because I'd cut into his conversation, I would be made to suck shit. 'Yea, I'm Eddy. Whaz up? Who wants me?'

'My name is Bruno. I'm the new usher.'

He had me. 'New usha?' he sneered. 'Wha new fuckin' usha?'

'Mrs. Lupo hired me yesterday.'

'Mudda's fuckin' cunt! Da ol' bitch hiah's someone and don tell me fuckin' dick! Den she fuckin' dumps it on me on hah fuckin' day off! Mudda's fuckin' cunt!'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Do? Go ta fuckin' woik. Wha da fuck else izz zah?'

'I'm supposed to be trained.'

'Oh, okay! Fuck me! Ya know, fuck me!'

I couldn't leave and the other guy was fully engaged in the performance. Eddy looked at his watch, sucked quickly at the cigarette pinched between his lips and his rodent snout, then issued instructions: 'Okay,' he said, 'we got us a fuckin' show change in twenty minutes. Go fine dat lazy fuckin' old Vic. He's my upstahs guy. Foist, get a fuckin' flashlight from da box unda the rigista inside. Den fine fuckin' Vic. Okay?'

'Okay.'

He flipped his cigarette violently against a parked car. 'Tell 'im Eddy says ta show ya whaz what, okay? But I wan yaz by da exits woikin' beforah da shows change soz the two of youz can help out. Got dat? Can ya handle dat?'

'I see Vic upstairs.'

'Right. Now, as fah az I'm concoined, yahs fuckin' trained,' he jeered. 'Now ya da fuckin' vice president of Low-eeze Thee-ate-ers.'

'Okay,' I said, grateful to walk away.

'Eh, hey,' he called, 'whaz ya name...Bruno?'

'Right. Bruno.'

He looked at his watch again. 'How come yahs late?'

'I became delayed.'

'She'll can ya ass if ya get delayed tumorrha. Better not be fuckin' delayed again tumorrha.'

Inside, I located the flashlight, found Vic in the balcony, and became an usher.

My second week on the job the theater began playing an Anthony Quinn festival that ran in the afternoon before the regular first-run movie started in the evening. *La strada* came on every day an hour into my shift. I'd watched the film a few times over the years and admired it very much. The mood, the enchantment of the music. Most people thought Fellini to be a genius. I'd agreed.

Near the end of the five-day run I knew everybody's dialogue by heart and I began to hate Zampano and resent Giulietta Masina's hamminess. I found myself angered by the banality of the screenplay and the oversell in Fellini's direction. Sometimes I'd get pissed off enough at parts of the film that I'd have to duck out of my post and stand in the upper lobby.

As it turned out, I got fired over a triviality.

Vic, my partner and immediate supervisor, was an old guy. Sixty or so. Not as old as Lupo, but old and arthritic. He kept to himself. Our one bad moment had come when he'd discovered me sneaking a cigarette. He insisted the act jeopardized his authority in the loge. I'd made a remark back and we hadn't spoken since.

Vic and I were approximately the same build and suit size. He'd called in sick and I was alone upstairs searching my mind for things to do while *La strada* was on, nipping from a short dog, a Cisco Wine Cooler, in my pants' pocket.

I had the bad idea to switch tuxedo jackets with Vic for the day. His was nicer than mine because mine had missing buttons on the sleeve and had a permanent sticky stain above the elbow.

The part of *La strada* was coming on where Zampano kills Richard Basehart and the musical scoring swells portentously. I'd come to hate the scene because of Masina's cartoon performance and the blaring of the moronic music. To avoid watching it I decided to go downstairs to the dressing area and exchange jackets with Vic for the remainder of my shift.

In the changing area there was a standing open cabinet divided into sections where the male employees kept their tuxedos. Each section was

marked off with a piece of tape above the slot with the employee's name written in pencil. Vic's slot was at the opposite end from mine.

I slipped on his tux jacket and was pleased to discover that it fit perfectly. Forty, short. I made the substitution of my coat for Vic's on his hanger.

Leaving the room, I took a piss, then used up more minutes by going to the storage box at the candy counter to swap my flashlight batteries for new ones. When I returned to the balcony I'd timed it right because Quinn had murdered Basehart and the imbecile scene was coming to an end.

My problem happened an hour later when Vic unexpectedly arrived sick to go to work. He'd gone for the last five years without missing a day and showed up out of a sense of duty.

In the dressing room when he realized that I'd exchanged jackets, he became nuts and unglued. He limped up the stairs and flung the loge doors open with a thud. To find me in the back row he began waving his flashlight beam in the faces of the balcony customers.

I tried to calm him down, offering to go downstairs and change back into my own jacket to settle things, but Vic had the flu or another disorder and had decided to make a big deal in front of the customers. One lady got up and reported the disturbance to Mrs. Lupo, who hurried to the balcony to demand that we follow her to her private office.

There, with the old Lupo in the role of hanging judge, Vic persisted in overdoing the deal, screaming words at me like 'liar' and 'burglar' and continuing to insist that I'd stolen his uniform jacket. He even stabbed my chest several times with his finger until I pushed it away and made him stop.

I explained that I'd picked the jacket off his hanger by mistake. But that only served to make him madder. He pounded her desk with a bony fist. I didn't give a crap for private property, he screeched, for Loew's Theaters. I was a punk, a hardened criminal type. One of us had to go. Him or me.

Copping a plea to save the gig turned out to be useless and stupid. I tried to put a more realistic spin on the deal by talking about my own uniform's missing coat buttons and the sticky elbow, admitting that I'd simply wanted to 'borrow' his jacket for the day. Old Lupo might have been satisfied with that but Vic wouldn't let up. The rant turned into a fit. Saliva

flew, neck arteries throbbed. Stuff about my sneaking smokes on duty, sitting in the back row when I should have been doing balcony rounds, and leaving my post to take unauthorized piss breaks. He knew just what buttons to push to get Mrs. Lupo's face wrinkles activated. I was dead. Bumped on the spot.

The next day I was in the 'Cash, Ten-Items-Or-Less' lane at a market and a lady in front of me had thirteen items in her shopping cart. A lady with a kid. A baby. Thirteen items.

While the line edged forward I counted her stuff over and over. The line was long and the closer we got to the checker the more edgy I got. When the woman set her groceries down on the moving ramp I informed the register guy that she had thirteen items, not ten as the sign specifically specified. I made the checker count the items, then I demanded that he not take her order. He smiled at the woman and the kid in the cart, made an excuse, then began ringing up her stuff anyway.

The deal escalated. I threatened the checker and started calling him fuck names. The child commenced to wail and a manager, complete with big smile and pocket pen protector, came over. He attempted to mediate but it was too late by then.

I swept the woman's groceries off the counter onto the floor and on my way out I knocked over a tall display of Tropicana Orange Juice from Florida mounted on a vat containing a million little square ice cubes. Shit was everywhere.

Chapter Four

AFTER LOSING THE usher job I hit a flat spot. Herrera at the temp agency told me that Olson's had a rule about not reassigning persons who had been fired from their assignment for cause. No second chances. So, instead of looking in the *Times* want-ads for work or making the rounds of the other temp agencies in midtown, I decided to take a day or two and remain in my room reading, going back to Tennessee Williams' plays and some of David Mamet, writing if the urge presented itself.

On the third morning I woke up with an idea for a short story. The words began coming out, jumping from my fingers. A tale about a deaf eight-year-old kid and his dog Bugs. The kid spends most of his days in his room in his imagination because he doesn't attend regular school.

By mid-afternoon I was near the end. Twenty pages. The boy in the story, Bartholomew, has discovered a sorcerer living on a gleaming silver button in the corner of his toy box. The tiny sorcerer shows Bartholomew many tricks and proves himself to have great mind power, moving objects around the room, changing the colors of the walls, having stuffed animals dance and do flips, then magically growing Bartholomew's feet a foot long. Bartholomew is awestruck and they become fast friends. He is shown how to tap his own indwelling powers. By himself he tosses a plastic truck out the window, then transforms it to actual size in the street. Then he raises himself off the floor until his head grazes the ceiling. Turning to look in the mirror, he sees himself wearing a thick silver astronaut's suit, piloting a spacecraft. Bartholomew implores his mentor to show him more.

Now the sorcerer runt knows that he's got the kid. He bestows an enchanted black robe on the boy and crowns him with a velvet fez adorned with the seven precious jewels. Bartholomew is told that if he truly desires entry into the deaf wizards' magical cult he must first make a gesture to prove his commitment, trust, and worthiness. A five-quart jug of yellow, sweet-smelling antifreeze is materialized by the elf, who demands that Bartholomew let his dog Bugs drink from it.

But the kid isn't stupid. He knows that if Bugs licks up the engine coolant it will poison him and he will die. The sorcerer says, 'Not so,' that he personally can cast a protective spell that will render the dog immune. This is an initiation. Bartholomew must trust him.

The boy is afraid and hesitant. The light on the wizard's glowing button is fading and when it vanishes he and all his magic will be gone forever. Bartholomew must have faith, act immediately or forever lose his power...

I couldn't make up my mind how to end the deal. Does the kid get chumped by the wizard and let his dog die? Is the wizard a friend, a kind of guardian angel, or a malevolent, pernicious little fuck manipulating the boy to acquire the soul of his spaniel? I came up with two or three endings but found them all deficient. Frustrated, becoming pissed off, I decided to take a break and let the answer come by itself. For the next half-hour I lay on my bed with the window open, smoking cigarettes, sticking my toe in the cloth circle at the end of the shade cord, pulling the blind up and down, permitting my brain to go to other things.

A mistake.

Soon it was assuring me that my story was puke, worthless cockshit. Another moron idea I'd left incomplete. A failure.

I got up and went to my writing table, looking down at the pages and pages of words. It was true. I saw the misspellings, the hurried errors, my hopeless, inaccurate punctuation. Slobbo! I flung the pages in the direction of the trash can. I was talentless. No wonder I drank and let queers suck my cock. Loser! Stuck with no job, near penniless, walled in like a cockroach surrounded by a rooming house full of junkies and perverts. I was finally where I really belonged.

I tried to stop it. To distract myself and give myself something to do, I went out to the market for cigarettes and Fretoz but returned with a half-gallon jug of Mad Dog wine.

In my room, unscrewing the cap, I let the first few wallops hit my stomach. I knew instantly I'd be okay. I'd done the right thing. Fuck the story. What mattered now, the important thing, was to defend against the noise.

Around dark I was drunk and going in and out of awareness with a crazed need for sex. I walked the ten blocks to the pornos in Times Square. I remember being in the back row of the theater, the guy next to me loosening my pants and letting them slide to the floor. He sucked me off.

A while later, another guy, a kid, got on his knees on the filthy carpetless concrete, licking my balls and fingering my asshole, massaging my cock with his hand until I was ready to come. Forcing his head down on my dick as far as I could, I blasted off. Hours later I remember being in a hotel room with an older guy - a black man wearing a tie. More wine. More sex.

The run lasted three days after that. When I finally sobered up my mind began mercilessly replaying some of the flashes, the unquenchable need for sex and depravity. The thoughts evoked so much disgust that I had to stop them - shut them off - there was a terrible need to kill myself; cut or stab my flesh. To die immediately.

I had to sell some things to pay my rent and the other bills. Family stuff. My mother's carved-ivory family heirloom scrimshaw pillbox that one of her uncles had brought around Cape Horn to San Francisco Bay in 1850; a ring bearing her father's German coat of arms, a gold chain my father's father, Nick, had kept his pocket watch on. Handmade in Abruzzi. The chain brought in the most. Two hundred dollars.

Chapter Five

DURING THE NEXT few weeks I went to work for another office temp place that I found in the want-ads; Workpower. I was drinking like always but the depression was okay, under control. I showed up for my assignments on time and didn't lose any days.

I like change. Workpower sends its people all over New York for its temp gigs and I began to learn how to get around the city; Wall Street, Union Square, Hunts Point in the Bronx, downtown Brooklyn. I became familiar with the important bus routes and began to get a functional knowledge of the subways.

Edna Green was my contact at Workpower. She was better than Herrera with the nicotine fingers. Calmer. If I'd call in to quit a deal Edna never pressed me for excuses or asked about what the supervisor said that made me want to leave or what I said back after what they said or what I did then. That crap. If she received no serious complaints on the employer-return-form everything was okay. I needed work. Edna needed to fill jobs.

I like to come and go. Nothing else. I don't want to hold stock or participate in the goddam profit sharing, or be groomed for something, or climb someone's rectum company ladder. The personality puke that always seems to go along with a regular gig - the pissing matches and favoritism, the politics, like what happened so quickly at the movie theater job - can nearly always be avoided if you stick to temp work; one call and a request for reassignment usually repairs any fucked circumstance.

But even with somebody nice like Edna you don't want to get bumped working temp. Getting bumped creates problems.

I did okay for a while, did half a dozen assignments without incident, then because of drinking and miscommunication, I got blown out twice in a row.

Number one was when I was a fill-in night dispatcher for a ten-truck twenty-four-hour commercial plumbing service. It was supposed to be a month-long post but I got canned after the fourth day because the boss's

wife disliked me and said that I appeared to always look sleepy when I came to work.

Number two happened back to back with number one. Edna sent me on a high-stress mail sorter/collector gig at an office building catty-corner across the street from Carnegie Hall. I'd had a couple of shooters on my lunch break the second day. Just enough to take the edge off. I was bumped for making a mouth gesture to the lesbian Puerto Rican amphetamine-sucking freak supervisor everyone on the staff had nicknamed 'Duke.' 'Duke' embarrassed me in front of a pretty secretary. She loudly reprimanded me for not being fast enough when making the rounds with the mail cart. I put my hand to my face and made a licking motion, forcing my tongue in and out between my fingers.

After 'Duke,' when I'd call in, Edna would tell me that business was quiet or some other shit which I knew was code for 'Take a walk, asshole.'

For a week I stayed in my room and worked on my play. It had a new direction and a new name, *Calliope*. About an intense, selfish carnival barker on the Southern circuit who wants to become an evangelist. Better than *Elmer Gantry* because my guy discovers that he really has powers to heal. But he's also a selfish scumbag which makes for a nice twist. Act II, Scene i.

Chapter Six

THE EAST END Hotel/Apartment is located on the east side of Manhattan on Fifty-first Street between Third Avenue and Second Avenue. Nowhere near East End Avenue.

It is a small, fifty-room deal that serves free rolls and bagels and coffee in the lobby to its guests every morning from seven to ten o'clock. It was once remodeled, years ago, and needs it again.

The ad I saw in the *Sunday Times* read: 'Rsdnt Nt Mgr Est Sd Htl Slry+Furn Apt. Snd Res.' The ad gave the address of an office building on Second Avenue and a suite number where the Res should be mailed. I'd lived at hotels and I once knew a guy with cancer named Phil who owned a fifteen-unit motel on Ocean Avenue in Long Beach in L.A. called The Captain's Lodge. For years old Phil had been on tour with Johnnie Ray and saved enough money playing the piano to retire and buy the motel. When his cancer got bad and he had to take his heavy pain meds, he paid me to cover for him at the desk three or four nights a week. I'd check people in and out, light the pilot lights for the gas heaters in the rooms, change the sheets in the shack-up fuck rooms, put towels in the bathrooms, and run the vacuum in the lobby when Phil told me to. I knew just enough about the motel business to apply for the East End Hotel's Night Manager job.

I got lucky.

I typed up a quick résumé but instead of mailing it like the ad required, because I was broke, I decided to take it over in person. I had nothing to lose.

That Monday morning at eight-thirty I wore a tie and boarded the cross-town bus from Fiftieth Street on the West Side. My head was clear and I'd been on beer only for the previous two days.

Half an hour later, getting off at Second Avenue, I walked south until I found the street number of the office building mentioned in the ad. Then I took the elevator to the eleventh floor.

On the door to Suite #1121 were written the words 'Arena Corporation.' Beneath that was Jeffrey M. Mistofsky's name. I showed

Mistofsky's receptionist the ad and was told to wait. I assumed that he couldn't make up his mind whether or not he wanted to talk to any unscheduled, spontaneous applicants. Half an hour later he buzzed and the receptionist walked me in.

Jeffrey M. was not a hotel man. I knew almost as much as him. He was a real estate speculator who'd picked up the property by default in a foreclosure. He had a guy named Shi (short for Chicago) who'd managed other hotels running the place for him. When Jeffrey M. read my résumé and saw that I'd listed 'Playwright' as a hobby, he stopped. He'd been reading up in trade magazines about increasing hotel bookings through marketing and networking to travel agencies and he'd been trying to find a Night Manager but he was also looking for someone who was good at writing letters and could do marketing too. My mouth mentioned some ass-kissing crap lie about always having an interest in marketing. My next lie was that I was also good at typing.

Jeffrey M. appeared interested. He shook my hand and sent me over to the hotel to meet Shi, the General Manager.

I walked to save the carfare.

The hotel had a big lion-faced knocker on the door and thick, dark ivy creeping up the block-brick façade. Shi let me in after I buzzed. While I was introducing myself, he slid the metal cage grating on the front desk closed, fastened a lock on it, and sat with me in the lobby on an old flower-patterned couch near the vending machines. We drank the hotel's free guest coffee out of foam cups and had an interview.

Shi was hip and cool and well-mannered. He never talked above a whisper. He was a light-skinned Afro-American with straight, processed hair. After important sentences, Shi would pause, nod his head up and down, then smile. I assumed this affectation was the kind of shit that they teach in hotel college somewhere.

Our interview went good. The Night Manager requirements were simple, Shi said; be on duty at the front desk five hours a day, from four to nine, then 'on call' the rest of the night. After the desk closed the Night Manager was essentially off but was required to stay in the building for emergencies and to answer the phone. The Manager's apartment was downstairs. The Manager could go to sleep or read or watch TV, but he had to be around in case the phone rang or to check in the occasional shack-up

couple or accommodate late stragglers arriving from the airports. Shi's shift came on at 8 a.m. which is when the Night Manager's shift officially ended.

He got up and I followed him to the entrance door to the Night Manager's quarters. It was next to the lobby entrance behind the front desk.

Shi flipped on an uncovered bulb and we descended the half-dozen steps to the basement apartment.

The place was clean and looked okay. Two good-sized furnished rooms with a crapper. The crapper had new plumbing fixtures and a yellowing plastic shower curtain depicting frolicking mermaids in some form of dyke embrace. He said that a color TV, a front desk phone extension for local calls only, and gas and electricity were all free and came with the apartment.

The only natural light in the place came from four narrow, opaque, chicken-wired windows located high up on one wall.

The kitchen had a stove and refrigerator and a heavy old dinette table with chairs.

We sat down in the kitchen and Shi talked some more, always remembering to nod and smile at the end of each barely audible sentence.

He himself did not live at the hotel. He lived in an apartment in the Bronx with his wife and kid. Shi's main complaint about being the General Manager/Day Manager for Jeffrey M. at the hotel was the turnover in the job I was interviewing for. He had fired the last night guy three days before, a person named Bill. A sixty-year-old retired post office clerk on a 3/4 pension. Bill had seemed responsible. Well-spoken. A non-drug-user. He'd looked okay too. The hidden deal about Bill was that he was divorced from a crazy twat who, when she located him at his new gig, began arriving in the middle of the night, banging on the front door with the hotel's heavy lion iron knocker and screaming deranged shit about Bill for the world to hear. Shi had been forced to give the guy the bag because of his 'X.' Shi went on to say that he had stayed late for two weeks of evening shifts to train Bill and firing him had been Mistofsky's idea, not his.

The man before the last guy had lasted only two months. His name was Isaac. Isaac was okay too, Shi said, except Mistofsky began noticing that receipts were down on the night shift. One night, worried that Isaac was running a game, stealing, Jeffrey M. sent a ringer in as bait. A fake guest.

The ringer watched Isaac slip the cash into his pants' pocket instead of the receipt drawer. Next morning, ba-boom, Isaac is history.

Shi paused for effect, looked me up and down, then bent across the table. 'I'll be direct,' he said, always remembering to whisper. 'I want to fill this position. I'm looking for the right man. Are you that man?'

I felt the question was stupid so I didn't answer.

Shi took out an expensive-looking gold pen from the inside pocket of his suit coat, then pushed it and a piece of paper across the table to me. He told me to give myself a grade from one to ten as an employee on my hospitality industry job in California. Then, he said, he wanted me to write that grade down on the paper and pass it back to him. Another jelly-dick management maneuver acquired at hotel college.

I looked Shi in the eye, nodded up and down for effect the way he did, then gave him a big grin, the biggest grin my face would make. 'I'm a goddam ten,' I said. Then I wrote the number ten down on his paper in big numerals, circling it a few times in a flurry, then pushing it back. 'I'm your guy, sir! Hands down! I'm ready to begin work immediately! Today, if you want me to.'

I was pretty sure that I had the gig. That afternoon in a pre-celebration mood, on the way back to my room, I purchased a jug of Mad Dog and nipped at it from the bag while riding back cross-town on the Forty-ninth Street bus.

My first day of on-the-job training began the next afternoon at shift-change time. Four p.m.

I was at the desk with my new boss. We'd been going over the check-in and housekeeping forms when a good-looking woman walked up the front steps to the hotel entrance. She was pulling a yellow dog which Shi informed me was a pedigreed Lhasa Apso dog.

The woman began searching in her handbag. Seeing this, Shi abruptly stopped what we were doing, left the desk and ran around to open the entrance door for the woman.

Her name was Tonya and her dog was named Bobo.

Tonya was in her late thirties. Tall, with long legs and flowing red hair. Fifteen or twenty pounds too heavy but very classy; wearing a sexy,

outstanding, green dress.

For the first time Shi's fake composure disappeared. He introduced us, beaming like he'd just won the lotto, talking in a real voice instead of his regular dufus management whisper: 'Tonya,' he said, 'this is Bruno, our new Night Manager. Bruno this is Miss Von Hachten. She's a resident of number three-sixteen.'

Miss Hot-shit did not stop or turn her head from tugging at Bobo, she mumbled something condescending like 'Oh, hello,' or 'How nice,' then continued across the faded yellow tulips patterned into the lobby carpet. To me the communiqué was clear; she had no time for hotel flunkies.

After Tonya was up the steps and down the hall Shi rocked forward on his elbows, picking up a pencil, and relapsed into his mumble. 'Rather amazing, isn't she?' he hissed.

I nodded but I didn't mean it. He wasn't looking anyway. His expression was elsewhere.

Everything changed. He only wanted to talk about Tonya. I was filled in on every fucking detail of the half-conversations and asinine bits of moron shit that had transpired between the two of them. Not even Jesus Christ himself, nails in his hands and feet, strapped to the post with chicken wire and duct tape, would have given a rat's dick about such nonsense.

My gut built to the point where it was beginning to knot and cramp and I felt a terrible need to punch Shi's face again and again.

To escape the insanity, I lied and said that I needed a bathroom break, hoping maybe my leaving and coming back might derail this imbecile cocksucker's brain and get us on some other subject.

When I was down the steps to my apartment I locked the door behind me, smoked half a cigarette, pissed, then took a long pull at the vodka jug I'd stored in the freezer.

But I was a fool. The minute I returned to the desk it started again. 'You know,' he began, as if I'd never gone anywhere, glassy-eyed, 'her first week here she left two pairs of her panties in the dryer. I knew they were hers because I saw her going up and down the stairs to the laundry room. I folded the panties and brought them back up to her apartment. After I knocked on the door and she knew it was me, she opened up and recognized her personal garments in my hand. You should have seen her expression.'

My gut was back in a worse knot than before. My brain screaming at me for the immediate death of this mad nigger.

‘Another time,’ Shi snickered, ‘she clogged the toilet in her apartment with too many paper towels - it might have been Kotex - I had to use the big plunger from the maintenance closet on the second floor. Then a snake...’

My mind’s command was clear; it told me to remove the dulllest pencil from the pen and pencil holder cup in front of us on the counter and plunge it deep into the side of this fucker’s neck, watch arterial spurts gush out onto the panelled walls and the flowered carpet until his lips went ashen and he was completely dead and his body no longer quivered.

I stopped him. Interrupted. I said that I’d forgotten something in my apartment, then excused myself.

Back down at my refrigerator, between gulps of air, I hammered more long hits at the vodka jug until finally I felt the click. Before going back up, I squeezed a wad of toothpaste into my mouth from the bathroom cabinet.

‘Another time,’ Shi went on through his moving lips, ‘she saw a man. You know, nobody, a guy in an army jacket...’ I nodded. I didn’t give a fuck anymore... ‘Tonya’s funny. She gets paranoid sometimes - about guys. She thought he’d followed her up from the subway stop at Lexington Avenue. It happens - she thinks that men follow her.

‘She’s standing there in the lobby, shaking-like. Afraid... So what did I do? The guy’s still out there, you know... so I close the grate on the front desk and go outside under the awning by the curb and inform this individual lingering there, whatever, actin’ like he’s waitin’ to use the pay phone - runnin’ some kinda pervert game - I look him in his face and I say, “Hey, my man, I don’t know you or your deal but, you’re loitering in front of my hotel, you know? So take a fuckin’ walk.” Then I push my finger up in his chest a few times to make my point, you know. So the guy leaves and moves on down the block, you know. I’ve spooked him. Okay, sure, he’s sayin’ shit as he goes, like “Fuck you” and that but, he’s spooked...

‘Anyway, I’m back inside and Tonya gives me this look. This big wet smile with those cat’s eyes of hers. Man, you know. We really connected. Know what I’m sayin’?’

I nodded ‘Yes’ again. A broad smile because now I was buzzed and couldn’t give a shit even if there was a nuclear war.

Shi wanted to know if I'd noticed Tonya's moles, above the 'V' at the top of her breasts. There were two. I hadn't but I nodded again and smiled again.

'From then on I knew,' Shi said. 'From that day on.'

'Knew what?' I asked, drawing a thicker and thicker circle around the dark 'X' I'd made on the message pad in front of me. 'Knew what, Shi?'

'C'mon man. Vibes. You know.'

'Oh,' I said.

'Course Mister Mistofsky's got his rules. A policy about never fraternizing with a hotel guest.'

He reached under the desk and produced a gray loose-leaf hotel manual, flipping it open to a tab where there were two pages of numbered employee procedures and policies. 'See,' he said, 'Mister Jeffrey M's got a directive for everything.' He thumped the plastic page with his finger. 'Frankly, personally, I regard most of this as over-management. You know, excessive.'

I nodded. I knew excessive.

Later on we did a walk-around of the hotel. The building had only four stories. There was no elevator.

Shi showed me the laundry facilities and the roof sundeck. We went from floor to floor with him unlocking doors and pointing out the differences in amenities in the remodeled rooms. Some had newer carpeting. Each had a toaster oven, a small refrigerator, a color TV, and Hawaiian-type pastel bedspreads featuring exotic, stupid flowers.

Room number 316/318 was next to one of the hall toilets. 'Remember who lives here?' he asked, unable to contain himself, as we passed Tonya Von Hachten's apartment.

'Yeah,' I said, 'Blanche-fuckin'-Dubois?'

The beginning of the end for me started the night before my scheduled first day off which was Sunday. My stuff had been in and unpacked and, except for a couple of times when the phone had rung past twelve, there had been

no late-evening activity in the hotel to disturb me. Zero check-ins. No problems.

Shi was staying the four hours after his shift every day from five to nine, to train me, help me get used to the desk and the credit card machine and the manual accountingentry system.

If a steady month-to-month tenant came in through the front door, he'd introduce me.

My daily habit was to have a few beers with dinner after he left and after I closed the desk. Nothing heavy, just enough to take the bumps out of the road.

That night, because I was about to complete my first week, I decided to celebrate. I sat up, well past midnight, working on my play, finishing the second act, drinking gin with ice and grapefruit juice.

At one forty-five Ms. Von Hachten showed up outside my manager's apartment and began pressing the night buzzer on the front desk. She was a resident so I knew that she knew that the hotel was officially closed. A big sign read, 'EMERGENCIES ONLY AFTER NINE P.M.' I watched through the distortion of my peephole for over a minute as she continued buzzing, hoping maybe she'd fuck off and disappear. Finally, having no other option, I unlocked the door.

She had on a silky robe with matching slippers, coordinated shades of green. To me, everything she wore announced, 'lick me, fuck me.'

I was still wearing my tie.

'Hello Miss Von Hachten,' I said, flicking the front desk lights on, measuring the words, wanting to sound unintoxicated. 'Can I help you with something?'

She was way higher than me. Blasted on booze but something else too. As soon as I saw her eyes I knew. 'No,' she slurred, 'you can't. I need to talk to Shi. Where is he?'

It was downers. Maybe Valium. Maybe Seconal. 'He's unavailable. Gone home. He doesn't live here,' I said, still trying to appear businesslike, avoid problems.

She flopped down on the lobby couch then glared at me. 'I'll wait.'

'Look, I can take a message. Do you want me to do that?'

There was an interval, a few seconds until the meaning of all my words fully filtered past the narcotics in her brain. Ms. Von Hachten got up, teetered for a moment, began walking away, then stopped. 'Hey look,' she slurred, 'I've...we've got a problem.'

'Ha ha. I see.'

'...You find me funny?'

'What's our problem, Ms. Von Hachten?'

'...Noises. I was changing...getting ready for bed after my bath... there were sounds...from outside the window, or in the hall. You'd better come up...you know, check it out.'

'Someone using the hall washroom?'

'...What?'

'Somebody taking a piss.'

She shot me an evil look - it too came on time delay. 'Hey, goddammit, listen! That's not what I said! I said...there's somebody...spying... watching me. Like a perv. A weirdo.'

Getting rid of her was my only priority. 'Ya know,' I said, measuring my words carefully, 'I did my rounds just before nine o'clock. I walked the halls, checked all the doors. You're in no danger.'

'Swell...so...I'm hallucinating?'

I began edging back toward my apartment door. 'Look,' I said, 'there's nothing I can do.'

Her crazy laugh was loud. It filled the lobby. 'That's the goddam truth...'

'I'll report your "incident." When Shi comes in tomorrow he'll see my note.'

'...Now hear this...pay attention here, goddamn it!...I want you - you, the clerk behind the desk - to come up to the third floor now...immediately, and have a look. Do your job!'

'The hotel desk is closed. I'm off at nine except for emergencies.'

'...What am I, a TV commercial!'

'You're loaded on your ass, lady. And a noise isn't an emergency. To me, at this time of night, noise hearing is a non-relevant, unimportant, chickenshit, irritating, non-emergency!'

'...Let me speak to a real decision maker. Get Shi on the telephone. Or whaziz name, Mistofsky...No! Forget that! Call 911.'

‘Call anybody you want! Call the weather, call Dial-A-Duck for all I care. Just do it away from me.’

‘Do you want to keep your job at this hotel?’

‘Is this blackmail?’

‘...Hand me the telephone...’

‘Go fuck yourself you crazy cunt!’

The next morning when I woke up sober and remembered the confrontation, I felt pretty sure I’d be fired.

But it was my day off so I spent the next few hours reading and drinking beer, listening to Jimmy Reed on my portable tape deck and waiting for Shi or Jeffrey Mistofsky to knock on my apartment door and tell me that I was bumped, to pack my gear and move out.

Noon came and it hadn’t happened so I decided to do my laundry in the laundry room downstairs, then go to the movies, a Claude Rains festival at the Thalia.

It was mid-afternoon when I passed the front desk on my way out. Shi was cordial, whispering as usual, trying to make small conversation. I didn’t ask if he’d seen Tonya Von Hachten and he didn’t bring her up.

By the next afternoon at a few minutes to four I still hadn’t heard anything. Before coming on duty, I did my rounds as usual, emptied the wastebaskets in the bathrooms on each floor and inspected to make sure that the hallways were clean. Shi wasn’t at the desk so I unlocked the cage, looking for signs that I’d been fired; an envelope, a notice posted in the log book. I didn’t see anything so I began my usual ‘check-on’ routine.

The hotel answering machine registered one message. I played it back. It was from Shi. A rushed memo letting me know that he was doing errands for Mistofsky and would be back at six o’clock to continue my training. I still had a job.

Just after sunset I was filling in the daily linen charts when I looked up and saw Ms. Von Hachten come up the hotel steps with two shopping bags hooked to her arm and Bobo on his leash.

I watched.

She stopped at the landing, setting her bags down to unlock the door. For a moment our eyes met through the glass. If she expected me to do

what Shi always did, deport myself like some limp-dick sycophant and leave the desk to rush around and open the exterior entrance, she was mistaken. Not me. Screw her. I wasn't her chump.

Holding onto Bobo Ms. Von Hachten groped in her purse for her keys. After locating them she unlocked the heavy glass front door, swung it open, then dragged her dog and her bags inside.

Instead of ignoring my presence, which is what I thought she would do, I was surprised when she walked directly up to the front desk.

She looked past my shoulder to the mail slots located on the wall behind me. 'Bruno,' she said, in an even, pleasant, un-fuck-you voice, 'I see something in my slot. Would you hand me my mail, please?'

The situation was awkward. I didn't say anything. I turned, located the slot labeled #316, then passed her the envelopes and bulk junk mail.

'Thank you,' she said.

'Sure,' I said.

But she didn't leave. She stood looking down, sorting through the envelopes and papers while I pretended to go back to counting what rooms were on the list to have their towels and sheets changed. Finally, she spoke again. 'Bruno,' another voice announced, a more business-like voice, 'I have something I need to say to you.'

I looked up.

'I owe you an apology.'

I didn't talk. I wasn't sure what to say.

There was more silence. When I realized she'd been waiting for me to speak, I said, 'Okay,' which was all I could think of to say.

Finally she went on; 'This is hard for me...I'm sorry...I was rude... The other night I got some bad news. A family problem. I'd taken some medication and then I heard those noises outside my apartment...I was a bitch. I let my frustration out at you.'

'Did you talk to Shi?'

'Oh yes! What a sweetie! He came up and re-keyed the lock on my door and put some kind of security latch on my windows to keep them from being unlocked from the outside or forced open. Everything's resolved.'

'That's not what I meant. Did you tell him about our argument?'

She was smiling. Perfect straight white teeth. Green eyes the color of a warm Florida ocean. 'No, I didn't.' She extended her hand. 'Friends?'

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘No problem.’

In her heels Tonya was at least three inches taller than me. As our hands shook the top of her dress containing her fat white freckled tits pressed up against the front desk counter.

We stood there.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘I’ve got to get back to work. You’ll have to excuse me.’

She smiled again. ‘Have a nice evening, Bruno.’

‘Okay. You too.’

Shi continued to spend his time licking Tonya Von Hachten’s ass and running her errands and drooling every time she crossed the lobby with her two-pound mutt. But I had an instinct about her. We were on speaking terms again and her smile made my dick hard but I was still leery.

And I was right too. A few nights later a similar deal to the first deal that happened with Ms. Von Hachten happened again. This time it was later at night, past two in the morning. I’d been in bed reading, sipping from a pint of Ten High instead of beer, hoping to induce my brain to give me a break and slow down. The front desk buzzer sounded several times. Pissed off at the intrusion, I took my time slipping my feet into my shoes and putting my pants on.

The buzzing got more persistent. Someone was holding the fucker down with their thumb.

I climbed the stairs and opened my door.

It was her in her green robe and nightgown. ‘Hello, Miss Von Hachten,’ I said, ‘here we are again.’

She was stoned again but not as stoned as before. And upset. ‘There’s somebody there, Bruno,’ she blurted. ‘God damn it! Some perv’s after me!’

‘What happened?’

Now she was yelling; ‘I’m moving out! It isn’t bad enough that I have to share my apartment with ten thousand fucking cockroach roommates, now there’s a goddam night stalker tip-toeing up and down the halls, probably rubbing his wang, licking my doorknob!’

She was way too loud for my hotel lobby. ‘Okay,’ I said, a finger to my lips. ‘Keep it down, okay.’

‘I hate this dump! I hate the cheap pink cretin wallpaper in the laundry room and the floral carpet!’

‘Hey!’

‘Okay, okay,’ she said, lowering her volume. ‘I heard someone, something. Either the sounds came from the fire escape or the hall bathroom next to my apartment. Just like last time - like somebody breathing hard, you know, humping the wall or something.’

‘Okay.’

‘Okay...what?’

‘I’ll put you in another room for tonight.’

‘What about this: you go sleep up there! Tomorrow morning at trash collection time let the detectives sift through the dumpsters on Lexington Avenue and gather up your body parts.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Call 911!...Right now. Immediately!’

‘No cops, Ms. Von Hachten. They won’t come anyway.’

‘Then go investigate!’

‘Okay,’ I said, knowing I was hooked. ‘I’ll go look.’

I went back down to my apartment. In the closet I located the long house flashlight that Shi had told me to keep handy for emergencies; floods in the basement, boiler room malfunctions. Then I put on my jacket, tucking my pint of Ten High into the pocket.

On Ms. Von Hachten’s floor I looked in the stairwell at the opposite end of the hall. Nothing. Then, with her behind me, I climbed the next two flights to the top floor to make sure that the heavy door leading to the sundeck was closed and locked. She insisted that I go out on the roof and check, so I did. It was cold, maybe twenty degrees. I shone my light around, then came back in. Nothing.

Downstairs outside her apartment, I checked the hall bathroom. I pulled the shower curtain back and looked inside. It was okay. I checked the bathroom window. It was okay too. Secure. Nobody’d gotten in.

Inside Ms. Von Hachten’s living room her dog Bobo was fast asleep on the couch. I checked her closets. Nothing. Then I inspected the windows, wiggling the latches, undoing the security gadgets Shi had installed, then retightening them.

Ms. Von Hachten was on the couch next to Bobo, watching me, petting the dog. Her robe's belt had come loose. Inside, I could make out the nipple of her chunky left breast as it pressed against her nightgown.

In front of her on the coffee table were half a dozen brown prescription vials. She picked one up, popped the plastic top, then let two blue triangle-shaped tablets slide down into her palm.

I was still cold from being outside on the roof. Shaking.

'Hey, you're chilled,' she slurred. 'Want a drink of something?'

'Okay,' I said. 'Whatever you've got, I'll take it straight up. No ice, no mix.' I was looking at the bulging nipple of her big left tit. 'You cold too?'

Ms. Von Hachten folded her robe closed then tied the belt. Her expression was odd. There was an attempt at a smile but not a real smile.

Dropping her pills on the table, she got up, wobbled, then headed toward the kitchen. At the doorway she stopped, spun back around like a breakdancer, then marched back to the couch, grunting as she flopped down. 'I forgot,' she said.

'Forgot what?'

'There was some...gin...I think...but I drank it.'

The robe was open again. The green silk nightgown was more than half way up her thighs.

I was smiling. Leering. 'You're coming apart there,' I said. 'Again.' I pointed.

This time she made no effort to close the gown or cover her legs. Instead she locked eyes with me. 'So...have you checked everything?'

I didn't answer. I walked to the kitchen.

Next to the sink in the trash I spotted the empty fifth of vodka. I opened cupboard doors until I found the whiskey glasses, then I filled two with three fingers each from the pint in my jacket and returned to the livingroom.

I set her drink and my bottle down on the coffee table. 'Anything else, Ms. Von Hachten? Laundry? Vacuuming? Your oven need cleaning?'

She was holding her glass, staring down at the bourbon, speaking quietly. 'My mother has cancer. She's back in Intensive Care. Aunt Liz says that this time she won't be coming home. Mom's fifty-eight. Not very old, is it?...to die.'

I couldn't think what to say so I finished my drink. 'Sorry,' I finally said because that was all I could think of.

'You bet, mister sensitive fucking Night Manager,' she garbled. 'Me too.'

It was enough.

I scooped up my jug and headed for the door. As it closed behind me she was yelling in a crazy, half-laugh; 'Jeez, shorty, don't go away mad... Let's have another drink.'

Half an hour later, in bed, naked, I was smoking. There'd be no sleeping so I was trying to read. I had a new, open pint of whiskey next to my head on the night stand and I was almost drunk. My thoughts were fuzzy. I began playing with my dick. It got hard right away. I had a decision to make but I couldn't seem to make it.

Finally, I got up, pulled my pants over the hard-on, stuck my feet in my shoes, flipped my shirt on over my head, and took a long slam at my bottle. On the way out I grabbed my keys.

'Yes. What?' a stoned voice demanded through the door after I'd knocked half a dozen times.

'Miss Von Hachten? It's Bruno, the Night Manager.'

'I know who it is.'

'Just checking on you.'

Again through the door the crazy laugh. 'What took you so long?'

'You okay?'

'You've got a pass key, right?'

'Yes I do.'

'Use your pass key, Bruno.'

We never found out who was doing the spying but it stopped after that night.

Near the end of my third week on the job, Saturday, at ten minutes to shift-change time, as usual, I reported to the front desk before doing my rounds. Shi smiled and said hello in his manager's whisper then told me that Jeffrey

M. Mistofsky was in the building and wanted to have a staff meeting with the two of us.

Ms. Von Hachten was gone to Florida. Her mother had died and she had flown to Key West to be at the funeral with her aunt Liz. Me and Ms. Von Hachten had spent three or four nights together in all, whacked on booze and pills, fucking and sucking. Her hot button was watching me masturbate.

I'd let her come near my cock but I wouldn't let her touch it or me. In five minutes she'd be crazy, begging. Lick me anywhere I said. A complete fuck monster.

Me and Shi closed up the front-desk grating and walked down the hall to Room 113, which was the room Mistofsky and Shi always used to have their private conferences.

Mistofsky was waiting for us, sitting on one of two desk chairs by the window. He motioned to me and my supervisor to sit down on the beds, then he handed Shi an envelope. Without looking at it Shi passed the envelope on to me. 'Bruno,' Shi whispered, 'I speak on behalf of Mister Mistofsky and myself, in my position as General Manager of The East End Hotel. You are terminated. Effective today.'

I opened the envelope. The check in it was for my last full week, plus three days. Through Wednesday.

I looked at each of their faces. 'Why'm I being fired?'

Mistofsky glared. 'You know why. Your supervisor tells me that you've been fraternizing with a hotel guest. Miss Von Hachten. More than once. Please do not attempt to deny this.'

I didn't talk.

'You have until Wednesday to remove your belongings and yourself from my hotel. Under the circumstances, that's more than generous. Any more questions?'

I thought about it but I didn't have any.

Chapter Seven

I MOVED BACK to the rooming house on West Fifty-first Street. Not my old room, but one floor up, same line, directly above where I lived before.

After a week it happened; a depression, covering me like a wet black towel. Staying drunk stopped it but I kept going too long, feeding another need; wanting to be out of control. Wanting oblivion.

It was a four-day. I slipped in and out of blackouts. I'd find myself walking down Broadway or in a record store arguing with the clerk about an album in the Blues Section, then the next thing I'd be in a porno movie looking down at some guy sucking my dick.

I remembered seeing the cuts on my arms and I remember the ride by cab to the emergency room but I don't remember harming myself. One of the gashes was deep enough to need minor surgery to repair the tendon. The other ones were okay to just stitch up.

I lied to the admissions guy so they let me go the next day. I copped to being drunk but said I'd fought off a mugger. I was sent home with a supply of tape and gauze and some pills for the pain.

I promised myself that I'd quit this time for sure. Scared shitless by my own madness.

And I did. I stayed completely sober and without any alcohol of any kind for three days.

Early on the morning of the fourth day I was awake. Sweating. Uneasy. Five a.m. Sitting on the side of my bed, smoking cigarettes and waving my gray legs one at a time above the shadows on the linoleum, I knew. I was thirty-four years old and I knew; alcohol had become my medicine, the thing that kept me in balance. It was my wedge against my attacking, endlessly filibustering, condemning mind.

I realized that I was unable to stop. And at the same moment that realization came I also was aware that, if I continued, sooner or later I'd be out of control again, that one night in a blackout I'd find the razor again or maybe jump in front of the Eighth Avenue bus or a speeding cab. Considering both conditions, both sides, weighing out the pros and cons, I

came up with what was the only decision possible; I had to drink. The rest was the tradeoff.

I got up, locating my pants in the street-light, my shoes and my shirt and my thick coat. Then I walked. Up Eighth Avenue, along Central Park South, Fifty-ninth Street, until 6 a.m. when the bars reopened.

Chapter Eight

THERE WERE A bunch of jobs in a row after that. Four. #1: Driver for a bootleg airport shuttle service operating out of the midtown hotels, #2: Peddling belts at lunchtime on Fiftieth Street by the Time-Life Building and around Times Square, #3: A ticket-taking gig at an after-hours club on Forty-sixth Street, and #4: A wacko stint as a window cleaner.

I liked the airport shuttle service best because I got to drive around the city and because they paid in cash at the end of each shift. Everything I earned was off-the-books with no deductions to the government.

I'd seen their advertisement under 'Drivers' in the *Times* and got hired on the spot because the morning of the day I walked in, one of their guys had called up and quit over the phone.

At first, because I didn't know the city, I made constant mistakes and had the passengers pissed off at me. But the company had a high turnover and my dispatcher didn't care about anything other than me showing up for work. When I'd get jacked up or in trouble about a destination, I would radio in and he'd give me directions.

Mostly, I spent my shifts bopping back and forth from La Guardia and Kennedy Airport and then back to the city. Pick 'em up here - drop 'em there. The tips were good.

Our barn was in the South Bronx and the service was owned and run by two Puerto Rican brothers, Alesandro and Hector. We were technically a gypsy cab and illegal because what the brothers had done was to make a back-door deal with the legitimate, larger services to carry their overflow without having to pay any of the heavy New York City licensing fees.

The problem was the equipment. Our vans were shit. The brothers owned three vehicles that stayed in operation fifteen to twenty hours a day. There was no towing insurance, and no back-up or contingency in the event of a breakdown. When one of the mini-buses would give out on an airport run, Hector would come out in his Chevy station wagon with the torn seats and missing headliner and complete the drop by delivering the passengers himself. Sometimes it would take him two hours to get back, attach a thick

link tow chain to the front bumper of my van, and pull me back over the Tri-Boro Bridge to Gerard Avenue in the Bronx.

The brothers were both certifiable wacks and their operation ran in continual bedlam. Yelling was the only communication method. Also, they'd jerry-rigged and substituted so many parts under the hood of each van to save money that what had been fixed only days before almost always would re-break right away.

The best mini-bus of the three ran good but had no heater. The driver and his passengers would freeze their asses off but usually always get to their destination. The second one had a secret gasoline leak that stank up the vehicle and a weird alignment problem from an accident. It crabbed down the thruway at an angle and would wear out a set of front tires every couple of weeks.

The last one was the worst. I was low man so I was stuck with it. Two of the motor's cylinders were inoperable and a billow of thick, uncombusted oil smoke trailed me through the New York streets like relentless fucking Jobert in *Les Misérables*.

Passengers griped constantly and self-righteous ecological motorists would honk and gesture at the virulent gray gook as it billowed out the tail pipe. Once, at a stop light, an indignant, coughing pedestrian with a metal-hilted walker cane put a crack in the driver's side window by tapping too hard.

In my third week on the job my van's engine finally seized up and quit. I was in rush-hour traffic on the Van Wyck Expressway five miles from Kennedy Airport. A sudden lurching occurred, then a clanking, then a thud. Ugly, black smoke and the stench of burning rubber began filling the interior of the van.

My passengers were forced from the vehicle and had to wait by the side of the freeway in twenty-degree weather until Hector arrived in his Chevy repair station wagon. They all missed their flights.

That night, when we finally got back, Hector gave me fifty dollars, laid me off, and confessed that they could not afford to have the van's engine rebuilt anytime soon.

Chapter Nine

THE TICKET-TAKER DOORMAN job was from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. at an after-hours club called Ponce in Times Square. Tips only. I had been misinformed about the earning potential, retaliated by reporting drunk, and was let go on the third night.

It was lunchtime. I walked cross-town to the bank to cash an old Workpower company check for \$16.23 that I'd been keeping in my wallet as a back-up. Eight people were waiting for service in the customer line and there were two tellers. Only two tellers. Lunch hour. I waited. Minutes passed but none of us in the line moved.

Then one of the tellers, a Middle Eastern-looking human, having finished with the patron she'd been attending, put her 'NEXT WINDOW PLEASE' sign up, and walked away.

I began yelling. I yelled at the official-looking assholes sitting behind the railing at the desks. The suits. There were two of them. I also yelled at the one remaining teller, a bald guy. What I yelled was as follows: 'Hey goddammit, I'm a customer here! Hey! An American-fucking-citizen! Look at me when I'm talking to you!...Hey, goddammit! You've got people waiting here for service. Where are the tellers? Are you fucking blind? You need more tellers! Our money sits there in your fucking vault earning interest so you can live in New Rochelle and bribe union guys and invest in oil stocks but we can't get a fucking check cashed in your bank or consummate a simple chickenshit transaction?...You sir, at the desk, does the word asshole hold any meaning for you? Oh sorry, how about rectum?...Hey, don't you get it? Wake the fuck up! We need some service here!'

The guard came over. A dildo wearing a gun with a different kind of foreign accent and enlarged pores on his nose. The guard put his hand on my arm and told me that I would have to quiet down. I yelled at him too

and I continued yelling until after they called a beat cop to get me out of the bank. But they cashed my check.

Chapter Ten

THE BELT GIG was okay. My rooming-house neighbor, an actor queen named Dylan, who I always passed in the hall, had another friend in the building named Neil. A dancer. Neil's room was on the top floor. Neil was a petulant, high-strung guy but very resourceful. When he wasn't a gypsy in a show he would support himself by his street-peddling business or teaching dance. Neil had a team of six people selling leather belts on the street. They worked the lunch rush from twelve to two and the night rush at five o'clock when the midtown offices closed.

Neil put me on and supplied me with the belt rack. The split was fifty-fifty. It was just after Thanksgiving so business was good on the good days, and I would earn a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars for three hours' work. Tax free. But, because of the cold weather, the bad days outnumbered the good. I was drinking more too but I still managed to show up and I continued to work on my play in the morning.

One difficulty with being a street peddler of belts is that the rack is large and clumsy and easy to spot from a police car. And other than the cold, the main drawback to the job was the frequent arrests. Peddling anywhere in midtown New York is not legal so when the paddy wagon shows up and you're a belt guy you are always one of the ones to get arrested because running with a seven-foot-high rack complete with dozens of leather belts is very difficult, especially on the wide avenue blocks, when the wind is catching the rack and billowing the goddamn thing like a sail.

The wristwatch guy had a light TV tray table and the girl who made the baby-bracelets used only a blanket that she spread out on the sidewalk and could easily pick up and run with. They usually got away. Not us. Me and the costume-jewelry peddler with his fold-up bridge table, and the stocking-hat guy with the big cardboard box, we'd get popped again and again.

The job lasted until a week before Christmas when Neil and I had a dispute. After one arrest they'd kept me twelve hours in a holding cell at the precinct for no reason other than to harass me. When I got back Neil

insinuated that the arrest was my fault because I lacked the desire to run down the block with the full rack of belts. I got disgusted and decided to be sick and stay home and take some days off. Drink wine. Work on my play. Watch TV. Fuck Neil.

On his way out, he continued to knock every morning wanting me to come to work. I'd tell him to go away but he'd stand in the hall nagging at me through the door about how my not selling his belts during the holidays was screwing his business.

Finally, that Friday, three days before Christmas (and payday for most of the office secretaries at the Time-Life Building), he convinced me to come back.

I'd set up and been working for only twenty minutes when the cops came and I got popped. It was bitter and freezing on Fiftieth Street that day and all the best spots were taken by the other peddlers: the good doorway and building-entrance locations between Sixth and Seventh Avenue. Nothing was shielding me from the mean wind whipping in off the river from Jersey. I saw the squad car but I was too cold and numb to run.

Later that afternoon, in a lousy mood, I got back to Neil's room to turn in my cash. The precinct cops had confiscated my rack again. And one of the hookers in the holding cell with me had a bad cold and had coughed and sneezed in my face non-stop for two hours. I'd convinced myself she had contagious TB. So I was pissed off. Ready for trouble.

High-strung Neil made a stupid mistake, again accusing me of being lazy and again blaming me for the arrest.

My problem is that I hold grudges. If you and I have had an argument and I've come out second or you are my boss and you've abused your authority in some way, I will wait, allow the annoyance to fester, even pretend that everything is okay between us, then, with what normally to others would seem like a minimum provocation, without notice, I will overreact and behave like a cornered snake. It's a bad personality flaw and I've had to pay the tab for it again and again. I'd also been drinking on the way home to keep warm and prevent illness from the hooker's coughing germs.

When pussy Neil started in and got hysterical about the impounded belt rack, my automatic first brain impulse was to punch him in his face several times, and that's what happened.

After I'd left his room and got back to my room, after shattering his glass coffee table by kicking it and tearing my wad of dollar bills in half, I realized that I'd been out of line. Overreacted. But, of course, by then, being sorry didn't mean shit.

I had eight hundred dollars saved so I remained at home most of the time. I'd see both Neil and Dylan going in and out of the building but they avoided me.

I got through all of Tennessee Williams' plays again and all of Eugene O'Neill.

But the blackness started again. I drank more to fight it. Again too much. For too long. But I didn't hurt myself this time. Nothing violent happened.

To break the cycle I rode the subway. For two days. The Woodlawn Line.

When that train gets to the Bronx it busts out of the tunnel into the sunlight and runs on the elevated tracks by Yankee Stadium.

And there you are. A few feet away. If you're riding in one of the cars toward the end and you stand when the train is pulling into the One-sixty-first Street stop, you can make out home plate. Where Ruth and DiMaggio and Mantle and Yogi Berra and Reggie slammed the shit out of that pill. You are right there within touching distance of the shrine.

I rode to the end of the line both days. A couple of times. By Woodlawn Cemetery. Reading Hubert Selby Jr., *The Time of Your Life* by Saroyan, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Reading those guys or staring out the window at the Bronx.

When I had to smoke I'd go to the last car. Usually it was empty. Sometimes I'd get off the train, stand on the platform, smoke my cigarette, then wait for the next Woodlawn Express. Then ride on.

By the first week in February I was completely broke so I had to start looking for work again.

Chapter Eleven

WINDOW CLEANERS IN New York City are mostly wine drinkers and head cases, the ones that work freelance non-union on the high-up buildings. And fools too. They're an overlooked demographic and someone should do a study.

I applied for the job cleaning glass with a firm called Red Ball Maintenance. The company held a contract to clean all the windows of all the state office buildings north of Fourteenth Street in Manhattan. They did apartment buildings too. Large buildings.

I got the interview because of Brad O'Sullivan who I had met at the staple-pulling assignment at the TV ad research place on Madison Avenue. Brad lived in my neighborhood in Hell's Kitchen and it turned out that we were both boxing enthusiasts. Once or twice on Tuesday night, fight night on TV, I'd run into him at Gleason's Bar on Ninth Avenue. The saloon showed boxing. Braddie's uncle was Johnny Murphy. A huge guy with a great, protruding belly. Murphy was the shift manager at Red Ball.

When I came in and sat down in his office, Murphy glanced at me from across his desk, scooped up my job application and began reading. He knew already from talking to Brad that I needed the gig, that I'd been out of work for weeks.

He completed reading and looked up. Studied me. My face, my hair, giving me an embarrassing once-over. Then he glanced back down at the top of the application where my name appeared. It happened to me a lot at job interviews, especially in New York. My name, contradictory appearance and coloring would cause people to do double-takes. Murphy's aggressive leer made me feel like a lab specimen.

'Your name's Dante?' he asked.

'Correct, Bruno Dante.'

'You don't look like a Dante. You don't look like no I-talian.'

He was right. But he was being too pushy with his authority. He twisted his gelatinous neck around the side of the desk to see the rest of me. Because of my shortness my legs barely touched the floor when I sat

upright in the chair. Murphy noted this and grunted. I watched his big lips curve downward and form a sneer. Hating him instantly was no problem.

‘My mother’s people are English-German,’ I said. ‘I get my light coloring from her side.’

You’re not from New York either, are ya?’

‘Los Angeles.’

Another sneer. ‘Oh, Hollywood?’

‘I was brought up in L.A.’

‘Everybody in the city would give their dick to get to the sunshine. And you go the other way?’

I didn’t answer.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I talked to Braddie. Braddie says you’re okay, that you’ll give me a day’s work. It so happens I may have an opening.’

‘I appreciate Brad’s recommendation.’

‘A lot of men apply here, Hollywood.’

‘Anyway, I’m appreciative.’

‘You are, huh?’

‘Correct.’

‘Ever do glass before, Hollywood? High-up work? Forty, fifty, sixty floors up?’

‘No. But it’ll be okay.’

‘Did Braddie tell you about how it gets when you’re up there?’

‘We didn’t discuss how it gets. What Brad told me was what you just said; that some of your buildings are over fifty floors. He mentioned that he worked for you for a while.’

‘Yeah, for about fifteen fuckin’ minutes. Braddie ain’t cut out for this deal. Did he tell you about cleaning the outside glass?’

‘You mean about using the belt to hook on? I know about that. We talked about that. I’ve seen it done.’

‘You scared?’

‘Scared? No. I need the work.’

‘I start my new guys off on the state contracts. Smaller jobs. Smaller buildings.’

‘Heights don’t bother me.’

The fat fingers of Murphy’s hands came around from the top of the desk and knitted themselves behind his neck causing his gut to thrust

toward me like a charging sandbag. ‘Not yet, Hollywood,’ he cackled. ‘You ain’t eighty floors up in five degrees temperature with the wind up your ass yet, either. I pay good. I bet he told you that, didn’t he?’

‘Right. That’s what peaked my interest.’

Murphy was a true asshole. ‘Peaked...your interest? Peaked?’

‘Is there something wrong with wanting to make money?’

‘I pay by the pane; inside and out, up and down. A full window. Three bucks a pane. Sometimes we get more depending on the size of the windows. Four bucks, sometimes more.’

My mouth now said something stupid. I regretted the words immediately and wanted them back. ‘So we earn by the pane. That’s how most people learn, isn’t it?’

The fat man’s instincts were prehistoric. What amused him most was another human’s discomfort. ‘How tall are you,’ he sniggered. ‘Five-four, five-five?’

‘Approximately.’

‘What does that mean? Approximately. Then approximately how much do you weigh? Approximately?’

‘One fifty.’

‘Approximately?’

‘One fifty...How much do you weigh?’

Suddenly two massive, moist fists were clasp my wrists, effortlessly flipping my arms face up. I struggled for a second but realized I was pinned. ‘Let’s see your hands,’ he snarled.

After inspecting my palms, seeing no calluses, Murphy sneered again. ‘Small hands! This is a hard job, Hollywood. You gotta bust your ass here. We ain’t chauffeuring people in an airport van...or seating guests in the loge...This ain’t a fucking clerical employment opportunity.’

I freed myself and yanked my arms back against my body. ‘Am I hired or not?’

‘My new guys top out at thirty to forty panes a day. That comes out to roughly a hundred bucks, your end. Take home.’

‘I’m ready.’

He glanced back down at my application. ‘Yeah, well, I ain’t there yet...Tell me something; what’s the “S” stand for? The “S” here in your name on the paperwork? Bruno S. Dante?’

‘Just “S.”’

““S” what? A letter in someone’s name stands for something. What’s the “S” mean?’

I completely despised this prick. ‘The “S” stands for Smart.’

A new sneer. Murphy crossed his arms and rocked back in his boss’s chair, his fat body oozing over the arms, his bulk popping out between the slats on the sides. ‘What’s a Smart?’

‘My grandfather’s name was Smart. It’s an English name. Look...’

‘Smart?’

I got up. I had had enough.

‘We’re not done. Sit down.’

‘I’m done. I don’t need this shit.’

‘You got the job, Dante. Sit down.’

I sat down.

Murphy picked up a red-leaded pencil and made a check mark at the top of my form. Then he swiveled his chair around to face the wall and began passing me different items; a pail, a brass squeegee with extra blades, several sponges, a pole for the squeegee, a heavy-smelling can of soap concentrate, a thick window cleaner’s leather belt with straps fastened to the sides. Rags.

After each item was passed he made a check on a box on his form.

Then we were done.

‘Be in front of the building at four forty-five tomorrow morning. You’re working the early shift. See Ben Flash.’

‘Ben Flash.’

‘The first time your count goes under thirty panes a day, Dante, or you miss a day without calling in, you’re fired. I pay on Fridays. Every other Friday.’

Our eyes locked. He was smiling now. His best fuck-you smile. ‘Have a nice day, Hollywood,’ he said.

I was by the door with the equipment and the pail hooked in the vee of my arm. I smiled too. ‘Okay, Bronx,’ I hissed. ‘Over and out.’

Chapter Twelve

I WAS A few minutes late the first morning because of the trains. And it was freezing waiting underground on the platform. The Times Square Shuttle only runs every half-hour at 4 a.m., which I hadn't expected. Then, after I took the shuttle, I transferred to the uptown IRT Lexington Avenue Express which took more time.

As I came up the stairs of the Eighty-sixth Street station, I saw a tall guy that I assumed was Ben Flash leaving the ticket booth on the southbound side. He saw my cleaning bucket and harness at the same time I saw his.

'Hey,' his words cracked the frozen air, 'you the new guy?'

'Yeah, Bruno... You Ben Flash?'

'Ya late, Bruno. Let's go. Let's hit it.'

I climbed the rest of the stairs then crossed over to the southbound side.

We waited together for the downtown local.

Flash wasn't much for small conversation. He sipped from a coffee container and nervously kept his eyes on the subway tunnel to see if he could make out the head beam of the next train. Finally he turned to me. 'Ya new at windows, right?'

'Right.'

There was silence for another couple of minutes. Then, 'Meet Johnny Murphy?' The words startled me and stabbed through the cold expanse of the platform.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Yesterday. He interviewed me. He's the one that hired me.'

Flash considered my reply. After another long interval he spat down at the tracks then clenched his jaw. 'Pisser, ain't he?'

I didn't answer right away. I wasn't going to say something about fat Murphy and have it get back to him and cost me the gig. So I just said, 'Yeah. A pisser.'

Our train came.

It wasn't yet morning rush hour. Flash opened his *Daily News* and began reading. He didn't speak for the rest of the ride downtown. I was left to stare at the faces in the subway. Faces that clashed against the orange hard plastic seats. Old people. Homeless. A transit cop. Night faces.

I'd only slept an hour or two so I closed my eyes too. My brain was resting, pleased to be earning money again.

When we arrived at our stop Flash stood up and shook me awake. When he got off I got off too.

We followed the length of the dark underground platform along the block to the Twenty-fourth Street exit. He was staying below street level to avoid exposing us to the icy sidewalk and the biting air outside.

Once up the steps and on the street, steam funneling from our faces as we shuffled along, Flash talked again. He didn't like talking but he did it as he appeared to do other necessary things: thoughtfully, with effort.

He went into what for him was a complicated deal, an explanation about his last partner. The guy had left the job to run an errand during lunch one day and never come back. When Flash got to the part about his not coming back he half surprised me by suddenly halting on the sidewalk, raising his palms and rolling his eyes, as if to say, 'I couldn't believe it.'

Then we walked on. Flash wanted to say more words about why the guy had left, perhaps advance a theory, but his syllables began mixing with the steam coming from his mouth, then stopped, cautious to interrupt the stillness of the early-morning air.

New York State's deal with Red Ball was that no disbursement would be authorized until the whole job was complete. Flash and the last guy, Lawrence (he pronounced the name Low-rinse), had spent three days on the building but, before they'd finished up doing all the glass on the administration floor, Lawrence had done his disappearing thing. Now, in order to receive the eight hundred dollars that the company had technically already earned, to get paid, Flash had to complete the admin windows.

It was still half an hour before dawn. Ben Flash tapped with his keys on the building's glass entrance door until the night security guy, who knew him, heard us and let us in. We took the service elevator to twelve.

We got off and I followed Flash down the hall to a door labeled 'Maintenance.' Inside, the room had a deep sink and mops and a shelf of tools and two or three aluminum ladders and more cleaning equipment and overalls for the other service people working in the building.

Whatever Flash did he did in ponderous slow motion, as if he were an imbecile who'd rehearsed himself again and again to avoid error. He turned on the hot tap full blast, then stood for a long time staring hypnotized at the running water. Then, with his pail in the sink, he measured out and poured in what looked like way too much ammonia and stinky cleaning solvent.

As the bucket was filling he explained about the proportions. Using this strength mixture, he said, the solution would take longer to freeze when we began doing the outside glass. I was instructed on the best way to tighten a cap on a plastic bottle, the way to wipe the excess ammonia off the container, what rag to use. On no account should I ever fill past the third mark from the top on the bucket.

When he'd completed his, my bucket was next. We repeated what we'd just gone through, including the stuff about the plastic caps and the ammonia bottle. I knew the lesson was important because Flash had used up at least a hundred words.

Finally, we rolled our buckets single file over to the exterior access window where we would begin work. Flash stared at the window for a while, then looked at me, then back at the window. I was beginning to be able to read him. I could feel when he was preparing to speak. 'Your job,' he said, 'for the first hour is to watch me and pick up what I do. Okay?'

I nodded. 'Okay. Sure,' I said.

He climbed out the window onto the ledge. It was an older building and the windows were tall and sealed. Each pane was five feet by three feet, one on top of the other.

Window washing was where Flash became an artist. An acrobat.

First, to get to where he'd left off, he had to work himself a quarter of the way around the outside of the building in the frozen air. He glided from window to window with the bucket hanging from the crook of his arm. Like a gymnast he hooked his belt onto the thick spiked nipples protruding from the sides of each window frame and bounced effortlessly along the ledge.

In less than a minute he'd vaulted his way to his leave-off spot. Then he clamped on and pushed backward as far as possible to take the slack out

of his harness. His body was almost at a right angle to the building. A spider on a wall.

Then he began cleaning, swaying, like the sax player in the old Johnny Otis Blues Band, washing two sets of the up-and-down panes at a time. For the top sections he used a six-foot wooden extension.

He'd squeegee the glass on the left, then unhook and flip himself to the next frame while the panes were still wet, bouncing out and clamping on in one fluid motion. Window ballet.

He did the next two panes and the next two after that until he had to hop back around the building because the cleaning solution in his pail was dirty.

Arriving back at the access window he motioned and I handed him out the second bucket, my bucket, and watched him bound his way back and start cleaning again. In less than an hour all the exterior panes on the twelfth floor were clean.

By six o'clock I was on my own.

Watching Flash do so many sets of glass had taken away my nervousness about falling. He'd told me the secret. It was simple: never look down and keep at least one strap hooked on at all times.

I filled my bucket and started on the eleventh floor. Flash filled his and went down to ten.

Right away I realized that window washing was a tall man's deal. I was inept by any comparison. Bumbling.

I knew that I would never be able to match my partner's level of competence but, until I was outside on the sheer, frozen concrete landscape by myself, I hadn't fully grasped what I'd be up against.

Flash was an aerialist, he'd bounded along easily on the ledge. Not me. My runty, short legs would scarcely stretch the distance between window frames. To compensate, instead of swinging out I had to push off the ledge I was on, grope and grab for the top of the next window with my fingers, dangle momentarily by one strap, then flip myself and the bucket on my arm to the next sill in one lunge.

For a while in the beginning I told myself that I was doing okay because what was motivating me was tallying up another three bucks in my

mind after completing the outside of each set of the up-and-down panes.

But there was another awareness. Fat Johnny Murphy had warned me; the real problem was the cold. My right hand was constantly numb. As I'd be swabbing a pane with my sponge extension, the cleaning solution would flow down along my pole and soak the sleeve of my jacket. I was wearing heavy rubber gloves but the liquid ran past them. As a consequence, when I'd put the hand down the other way to re-dip the sponge into the bucket, the freezing chemical goop would drip inside my glove and numb my fingers. I tried switching hands but the problem just duplicated itself.

The result was that it took me three or four times as long as Flash to do a set of panes. And moving from window frame to window frame became even slower going too because of having to contend with the unsureness of my numb fingers. An hour into my first assignment I was frozen stiff and exhausted. I was unsuitable for the occupation. I hated the deal.

Each time I made my way back inside from the ledge to change my cleaning solution in the maintenance closet sink, I'd have to thaw my hands under the tap, gradually increasing the water temperature until the sensation in my fingers returned.

It was just after eight o'clock. I'd completed about half the outside windows when I decided it was time for a break - an interlude to settle whether I should go on working or walk off and leave the fucking job.

After I thawed out at the sink, I walked the inside perimeter of the floor, examining my glass. It seemed to me that the windows I'd done were no improvement over the unwashed panes. Murky serpentine vertical squiggle blotches divided the clean sections on each of my panes. I felt disgusted. Beaten. A complete, dickless, abysmal failure.

I couldn't make up my mind what to do so I decided to walk around. I made my way down the hall until I came to a door labeled 'Employee Room.' Inside, I found a table and sat down after helping myself to a cup of coffee and a free donut. The donut was the last one in the box - a gay, preposterous-looking multi-sprinkled reject. Perfect for me.

I had lighted a cigarette and begun reading the discarded Employment section of the *Times* when a squench-face-looking female state employee, stopping at the coffee urn, tapped me on the shoulder to point out the 'No Smoking' sign on the wall.

I drank down the last of my coffee then made the decision to go back out by the elevator, smoke some more, and finish the want-ads.

The admin floor I was on seemed to be the hub of the building's activity. People getting off the elevator and getting on, going into the office, reporting or punching-in or whatever government workers did, then coming back out and taking the elevator down.

I sat on my window sill observing the activity through the glass door of the office, watching and smoking, forming dislikes and opinions about the faces that entered and came out. One woman going in looked a lot like Vanessa del Reo, the old porno star. I remembered the movie where Vanessa gave a blow job to a three-foot-tall midget.

The next person leaving the admin department was a heavy-set black lady wearing a business dress and carrying a briefcase. Important-looking. Definitely a supervisor or manager of one of the battalions of laborers.

She was getting into her furry winter coat, pressing the 'Down' elevator button. When she saw me sitting on the sill wearing my harness with my bucket at my feet, she smiled, then made small talk to avoid the awkwardness. 'Cold this morning,' she said, 'isn't it? Out there...outside.'

I nodded. 'Anti God.'

'What time do you fellows start?'

'Before dawn. Arctic Circle Standard Time.'

She was big, standing at least six feet in her heels, with even teeth and a friendly way about her. 'So,' she went on, noticing the crushed-out cigarette butts by my feet, 'by now your day must be about half over.'

'I need an opinion,' I said, half surprised at myself for speaking the words. 'Will you answer a question for me?'

She folded her arms then smiled again. 'An opinion? That depends, doesn't it?'

'Not expert analysis. Just your point of view. About windows.'

The smile was still there. 'Building maintenance isn't my field.'

'This'll only take thirty seconds. Okay?'

The big lady chuckled then looked up at the number displays above the three elevator doors. None were within four or five floors of the eleven numeral. 'Okay,' she said, 'Thirty seconds. What do we do?'

I pointed down the hall at the last set of upper and lower panes I'd cleaned. 'Those windows over there. The ones in the corner, I'd like you to walk over to them and tell me what you think.'

'What I think?'

'If they're clean.'

She studied my expression. 'Okay,' she said, then walked the fifteen feet to the set of glass. I followed.

'Now what,' she asked, after quickly checking the two.

'Clean?' I asked.

'They look okay. I'd say...satisfactory.'

'Yeah but, what about the streaks? Don't you see streaks?'

She examined more closely until she seemed to make out the dark snaky blotches that, in my opinion, disfigured each pane. 'You've cleaned these? Correct?' she asked.

'Twenty minutes ago.'

Her smile was back. 'Soo...how long have you been doing windows?'

'My first day.'

'Well, to be honest...'

'You're right,' I said. 'Screw it! The hell with it!' I began unhitching my belt.

'You're quitting?'

'Thanks for helping me to decide.'

Just then an elevator car arrived, clunking to a stop. The big lady hurried over, picked up her briefcase, then looked back. 'I have to go.'

I watched the doors close. She smiled goodbye, shaking her head from side to side. I smiled back.

Less than a minute later, an 'Up' car arrived. I was back sitting on the sill. Smoking. A group of employees got out and headed toward the glass office doors. Flash was behind them.

He saw me and walked over, saw my equipment and harness in a heap on the floor. I could tell that he wanted to say something but it took several seconds for him to assemble the words. 'So, what's up?' he asked finally.

'On a break?'

'Yeah.'

Flash lit his own cigarette and sat down on the sill a few feet from me, then worked himself into another question. 'So...how many'd ya do?'

'Those,' I said, pointing to the bank of windows along the wall.

He considered the information. 'Insides too?'

'No. Only the outsides.'

Another pause. He flicked the ash from his cigarette onto the floor, stepped on it with one work boot, then the other, then searched his shirt pocket for something that wasn't there, then checked his watch. 'I'm done downstairs,' he announced finally.

Not knowing what else to say, I said, 'Oh.'

What he had been looking for in his right shirt pocket turned out to be in the left pocket; a used toothpick.

He probed a gap in his bottom front teeth until he was ready to talk again. 'We're okay,' he said. 'We're still on schedule.'

I looked at him, watched him suck at the stupid sliver of wood. 'Hey look, man,' I said, 'I quit! I'm done. I'm no good at this deal.'

He considered my declaration for several seconds. 'Huh?' he said.

'This.'

'What? Glass?'

'Yeah.' I pointed at the line of windows. 'Look...look at the goddamn streaks.'

Flash looked. He even stood up and walked over to the windows. After checking a few he returned to the sill and sat down. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Okay. So what?'

'So what? So what is those windows! They're still dirty!'

'Ya know...' he said, then stopped, spitting his toothpick at the floor, looking from me to the line of streaked panes then back to me '...what happened is you forgot to wipe your squeegee...After you swiped you have to wipe. Wipe the squeegee with your rag. The rubber. If you don't wipe the rubber you get streaks. Ya know?'

I didn't care. 'Yeah, well, they're fucked! All of 'em. You can see they're fucked!'

'Okay...Well, so what?'

'What do you mean, so what?'

He thought again. 'I mean so what?'

‘It doesn’t matter? You’re saying that me not cleaning those windows correctly doesn’t matter. Is that what you’re saying?’

Another interval for word assembly. More silence. Then, ‘Look Dante...like I told you...remember? This is a state contract job. Ya know...it’s what I said before...we get paid by the building...’

‘I don’t care.’

‘Okay listen...What I mean is you could piss on all the glass on this floor and on the floor above and then take the elevator down two floors and piss on those too, ya know, and it wouldn’t make any difference. Ya know? Understand? What matters is that we finish all the floors and get the Building Maintenance Supervisor to sign off. Understand? He don’t check windows...he signs forms. Period.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I don’t care. I hate this fucking job. Understand?’ I held up my raw hands. ‘Look,’ I said. ‘They’re just now thawing out. It’s fifteen fucking degrees outside on that ledge.’

Ben Flash stayed calm. He stared down at his shoes, then at the elevator doors, then back down at his shoes.

Finally, he got up. I watched as he walked to the other end of the hall to the emergency exit door. He pressed the bar and opened the heavy plated entrance to the stairwell. Then he looked back toward me, motioning me to follow. ‘Over here, Dante,’ he called, half-whispering. ‘I want to show you something.’

I’d had enough. Whatever it was, I didn’t want to see it. ‘Look Flash,’ I called back, ‘let’s forget it, okay? I’m going home.’

‘Hey,’ he said, ‘I’m still the boss on the job, right? I’m your supervisor, right?’

‘Right.’

‘Okay, ya know...I said come here. Okay?’

I got up and paced my way down the hall to him.

Once we were both inside the stairwell, Flash let the heaviness of the door hiss it shut.

‘What?’ I said.

From the interior pocket of his coat he pulled a long, brown paper bag. He folded the lip of the bag back to expose the neck of a bottle, then he unscrewed the cap and took a long slam. When he was finished he pushed the bag against my chest. ‘Hit this,’ he said.

‘What is it?’

‘It ain’t Windex. Take a hit.’

I grasped the bag, tipped it back and took a deep gulp. It was sweet and good. I knew right away; it was Mogen David Wine. Mad Dog 20-20. I took another long hit.

When I returned the jug Flash sucked back a deep draw. ‘Ya know,’ he said, then stared at the floor, getting ready, acquiring syllables; ‘Ya know...I know it gets cold up here. I know that, ya know...Some days up here I hate the fucking cold...Some days I hate fucking God, ya know?...Some days I hate the fucking President of the United-fucking-States. Some days I wish I could park a fuckin’ U-Haul truck loaded with a fucking fertilizer bomb and a fuse in front of the embassy of every dark-skinned minority turban-headed sandnigger Middle Eastern cocksucker that ever mooched a fucking welfare check in this town, ya know...And some days, most days, I hate that fat fuckin’ cocksucker Johnny Murphy. Most days. I could easily kill that cocksucker; squash his ass like a fucking bug for the nasty shit that comes out of his arrogant, mean-ass mouth! Ya know? I can hate that cocksucker real bad! Ya know!...But, ya know, like I said, some days are worse then others...’

He reflected, took another long pull at the Mad Dog bottle, then decided to go on. ‘See Dante,’ he said, ‘here I am, ya know, I’m up here slammin’ my dick against the frozen glass day after fuckin’ day and one fuckin’ Friday a couple a month ago I stop by the fuckin’ office to pick up my fuckin’ paycheck and guess what I find out? Guess? I’ll tell you. I find out that that Murphy cocksucker and the other guy, his boss, I refer to that cocksucker as cocksucker number two; well, these two cocksuckers have conspired together to shave my fuckin’ hours because of some fuckin’ chickenshit clever new loophole they have found out that they can get away with using. See Dante, as of a month ago, cocksucker number two, that other mick fuckin’ cocksucker that employs that fat cocksucker Murphy, don’t have to pay traveling time no more to the employees because, all of a sudden, both cocksuckers have decided together that they can put all of us on fuckin’ independent contractor status, see. So now, everybody loses four hours off their check. Four hours, ya know! Sixteen hours a month!’

He pushed me the bottle and I took my turn. A long pull.

Flash went on. Nothing could have stopped him. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘but here’s the juicy fucking part, ya know; they still take fuckin’ deductions out. Cute, huh? They’ve just changed the name of what they call the fuckin’ deductions. See? So now, because we’re IC status, independent contractors, they can bill us for supplies and shit where before they had to give it to us automatically as part of the job. Now they can fuck us twice instead of once. Ya know, its like a fuckin’ art form. Ya know? I mean, you gotta admire real professional loophole cocksuckers...Cleaning supplies, ya know. Even rags. Believe that! The cocksuckers now charge us for rags! It’s right there on my check stub in the Deductions Column. “Rags,” three dollars. No bullshit. “Rags.” Grand, ain’t it? Ya know...The two mick cocksuckers! They’re like a couple of fuckin’ Northern Ireland hit men. That fuckin’ fat Murphy fuckin’ cocksucker and the owner, that fuckin’ Benjamin Moriarty, mister fuckin’ Red Ball cocksucker himself! Benny Moriarty. I hate ‘em! They’re both cocksuckers, ya know? Know what I mean?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘I know what you mean.’

Flash took half a dozen long pulls at the bottle then passed it back. ‘Take a drink, Dante. Hit it! Take a good one!’ he said.

I did. Then pushed it back.

‘So now, because I opened my mouth and complained about their chickenshit tactics with the paychecks, Murphy’s new thing - the dicksuckin’ fuckin’ scumbag cocksucker - Murphy’s new thing is to stick me with every new guy who signs on. No offense, Dante. But, ya know, it’s like my fuckin’ penance for standin’ up for myself. My punishment. I’m on the fat prick’s shit list. See?’

I did. I saw.

‘Hit it again, Dante.’

I did. I took long pulls. Boom! Boom! Boom!

‘Every day around this time I take my break, ya know. I take a full half-hour. Sometimes the full hour. Fuck ‘em, ya know? They ain’t payin’ me for my breaks any more. So I say, fuck ‘em! Ya know?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Sure. Fuck ‘em.’

We smoked cigarettes and passed the jug back and forth until it was gone. Flash talked and talked. For him, at least a week’s worth of words. Maybe two weeks’. I was content to drink and listen.

‘Well?’ he said when the jug was played.

‘Well,’ I said.

‘Okay?... Ya know?’

‘Yeah.’ I said. ‘Okay.’

‘You gonna shitcan this deal or stay workin’ with me?’

I thought about it. The Mad Dog had re-adjusted my perspective. ‘I’ll stay workin’ with you,’ I said.

Chapter Thirteen

THAT FRIDAY AFTERNOON started a long weekend holiday. President's Day. The changes, the new job, sleeping no more than an hour or two at night had made the voices in my mind too loud for too long. I lied, told Flash I was sick, then borrowed fifty bucks and went home early to get drunk.

The run lasted three days. Wine only.

Late that afternoon, high on Mad Dog 20-20, I stopped in at the luncheonette on Eighth Avenue around the corner from my rooming house.

LaVonne was behind the counter. Her shift was the afternoon and dinner shift. She was young, nineteen, supporting a two-year-old kid with the waitress job. Pure black dancing Afro/Puerto Rican eyes and shiny hair down to her ass when she let it down.

We'd talked quite a bit. About human nature and jobs and this kind of boss versus that kind. She loved movies too and was a big fan of every film Harrison Ford ever made.

I had come in a little drunk many times because I was frequently a little drunk. But this time when I came in it was different. I was very drunk.

The luncheonette was empty except for two neighborhood women at the corner table by the window, and Mister Dave, the owner, in the kitchen frying liver and onions.

I was on the end stool which is where I always sat. I'd been wanting to ask LaVonne on a date for over a month. Out for a walk or for coffee or to the movies. Being drunk helped me make the decision that now was the time.

She had just refilled my coffee cup, then smiled, with her even beautiful teeth that looked as white as a priest's collar. Spinning away, holding the half-full pot, she was about to start in the direction of the two women customers at the table. I tried to speak, to catch her attention, but the words were slow in coming, derailed at some remote cerebral switching station. So I tried something else, plan B, spontaneously lurching a hand out

to stop her. That didn't work either because somehow the hand collided with her arm, the one carrying the glass pot. It fell and broke on the floor.

LaVonne jumped back. Surprised.

Then things in front of me began toppling over and falling; my own cup and saucer, the salt and pepper shakers, a napkin holder. They appeared to be self-propelled, upending themselves and plunging from the counter to the floor. The last thing down was a stainless steel cream container, exploding against the linoleum, soaking LaVonne's legs and waitress shoes, dispersing a wave of milk on top of the lagoon of steaming coffee and broken glass.

Then she slipped.

Things got bad after that.

I wanted only to help, to steady her. One of my hands came to rest on her firm right titty. There was screaming.

The women customers at the table had me wrong too.

Mister Dave came out from the kitchen as LaVonne was pulling herself away from me. Dave was Israeli. In his sixties but still healthy and well over two hundred pounds. He had a low tolerance for anyone who would put their hands on his female help.

The wind-up was that I was pulled and dragged out the door of the restaurant.

Chapter Fourteen

THAT MONDAY I reported back to work. Broke. Hung over and shaking, but sober.

Me and Ben Flash had moved on to another smaller state job on Park Avenue South. The offices of Building & Safety Administration. One floor in a tall building.

Even though it was a flat-fee assignment, I was in training so Murphy decreed through my supervisor that I'd be paid by the window only, less the fifty dollars I had borrowed from Flash.

My second day of work I washed twenty-eight panes. Both sides. In and out.

At the end of the job, after we'd packed up and were ready to leave and move on to our next assignment, Flash decided to let me in on a ritual he practiced. I got on the elevator with him and we took the car up to the top of the building. The fifty-sixth floor. Flash knew where the roof access was located, so we climbed out.

I followed him as he crossed to the edge. It was bitter cold. We looked down. Then he spit over the side. A big glob of phlegm and saliva. After he'd spit he leered at me. 'Okay, Dante,' Flash said. 'Your turn. Go ahead.'

I spit too.

'How's it feel?' he asked. We'd watched my stream disappear out of sight. 'Okay,' I said. 'It feels okay.'

'You bet your ass! It feels great!'

The weather improved and the temperature went above freezing. Mid-thirties. By Friday of that week we were on a semi-annual contract apartment house uptown off Madison Avenue; an old high-rise relic built during Prohibition, complete with mean-faced concrete gargoyles poised to leap from the cornice of every floor.

It was a massive structure; seventy-seven stories. Fat Murphy assigned three teams of two men to the job. We picked numbers in the office for the

section assignments. Flash and me drew the top twenty-five floors.

But the weather was warm enough to snow, so it snowed. We lost half of the first day. The group of us, all six, sat in the basement with the building security guy playing nickel poker and drinking coffee with wine from styrofoam cups. We had reported at 5 a.m. so by 6 the coffee was gone and we were at the wine straight from the bottle - Boone's Farm and Triple Jack.

Around nine o'clock the temperature warmed some more and the snow stopped, so we went up. Flash was okay because he was always okay but I was drunk. So were most of the other guys.

I started on seventy-six and Flash took seventy-seven. We'd decided to alternate floors as we worked our way down.

I did my first few panes, moving along. I was much better with the squeegee and pole now. More confident. But this was an old, privately owned apartment house rather than a state office building, which made a difference in how it got maintained. Everything was rickety. The exterior paint was chipped and slippery and there was dry rot in the window frames. Some of the glass panes rattled as I swiped across them with my squeegee.

I'd done about a dozen panes and I was flipping over from the last sill when I swung out and hooked my right harness strap to the far right hook of the next window. That went okay and I completed the maneuver by bouncing onto the sill. If I'd been sober I probably would have noticed that the spike I had attached my strap to was loose and wobbling.

But I didn't notice.

Clamped in on both sides of the window I steadied my bucket and leaned back with my full weight.

Later on, after falling off the ledge and being suspended seven hundred and fifty feet in the air for several minutes until Flash could pull me up, I realized that this was the closest I'd ever been to accidentally killing myself.

At first I was too scared to yell so I just dangled. I'd let go of my cleaning pole with the brass squeegee and the half-full bucket of cleaning solution. The stuff caromed off the ledge of the floor below then plunged the rest of the way to the street.

(When you're at that distance from ground level you won't hear the noise when falling objects slam down against the sidewalk below or collide

with the roofs of parked cars. The sound doesn't travel back).

Just beneath me, Flash heard my stuff as it clattered and bounced off his floor. He looked up and saw I was in trouble, then forced open an apartment window and rushed up the service stairs in time to haul me to safety.

Half an hour later, after I'd calmed down a bit, the two of us took the elevator to the ground floor and left the building. Flash helped me search the street and sidewalk until we located my mangled bucket, my broken pole and the rest of the window-cleaning gear.

Red Ball's storefront is located on Eighty-sixth between Lexington and Third. We walked the three avenue blocks cross-town on Eighty-sixth. I didn't talk and Flash didn't talk.

When we crossed Lex Flash stopped at the liquor store on the corner. It was close to the Red Ball office and he knew the counter guy, Perry. He paid for two short dogs for himself and two for me, then we stood in a doorway on the avenue, out of the cold, smoking and sucking down the Triple Jack until it was gone.

By the time we entered Johnny Murphy's office I was okay. Better. I set my deformed window-cleaning gear down on his desk. Murphy glanced at the stuff but didn't react. 'What's up?' he said, eyeballing Flash, then me. 'You guys workin' some kinda new half-day schedule?'

'I quit,' I said. 'As of today. Immediately.'

There was no reply from Murphy. Instead, he began piling my harness, the mangled bucket, squeegee and other stuff on the floor beside his desk, counting each rubber blade and sponge as he set it down.

When he was done he rocked back in his chair. 'There's damage to this equipment. Red Ball company property.'

Flash stepped forward. 'Ya, well, ya know, fuck the company property!'

My partner and Murphy locked eyes. Murphy smirked. 'You men been drinkin' this morning? Starting your weekend early?'

'Fuck you too Murphy,' Flash snarled. 'How's that! I'm hot about this. Fuck it, ya know. Maybe I'll quit too.'

The fat man got up, still calm, walked the distance to his open office door, swung it closed, then returned to the desk and sat down. 'Okay, Flash, what's your problem?'

'My problem?' Flash shot back. 'Not my problem, Johnny Murphy; your problem. This man just now fucking-near fell seventy fuckin' floors! That building - that fucking Stuyvesant Apartments antique rattletrap piece-a-shit cocksucker on Eighty-fifth - that fucker is unsafe! That's your problem. Dante was hooking on and one of those rusty spike cocksuckers came completely out of the concrete, and this man, a new man, almost got himself dead. Ya know? I mean, that's bullshit! You know it and I know it. Every harness monkey in this company ever worked up the side of that cocksucker knows its a bum ride. And don't grease me, for chrissake. I don't want to hear that I'm crazy or any of that shit.'

The big man leaned back in his chair but avoided eye contact with either me or Flash. He glanced back around the desk at the broken equipment, then he took his time lighting a cigarette. 'Don-tay?' he said finally, addressing me, as if it were a question.

'Yeah?' I said.

Murphy opened the center drawer of his desk and removed the company's check book; a long, black payroll ledgertype deal.

'Spell it. Is it D-o, or D-a?'

'D-a,' I said.

'First name again?'

'B-r-u-n-o.'

'Right. B-r-u-n-o.'

He began filling in a check; my name, the date. 'Okay, Flash,' he said, tapping his pen against the desk, 'what's the man's count? How many panes?'

Flash shot me a look, then winked. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he located a small spiral note pad, found the right page, then read out my daily totals. When he was done he double checked by adding again. 'Ninety-seven,' he said.

Murphy repeated the number. 'Ninety-seven.'

Flash had increased my count by twenty-five windows.

'Three dollars a glass?' the boss asked.

'Right,' Flash said. 'Three bucks.'

‘But let’s not forget there was a thirty-dollar advance, correct?’

‘Correct.’

‘Less another twenty dollars for the broken bucket. Less fourteen-ninety-five for a new squeegee...’

‘Less my dick! Less nothin’!’ Flash shouted. ‘How could the fuckin’ breakage be the man’s fault?’

Murphy sucked his teeth. ‘There’s damage, that’s all I know. Less twenty then. We split the difference.’

Flash sneered. ‘Twenty ain’t fuckin’ half of thirty-four ninety-five, Johnny Murphy! Seventeen-fifty is fuckin’ half.’

The boss smirked. ‘Have it your way.’

When Murphy had finished filling in my check he signed it, tore it out of the book, then handed it across the desk.

I folded the paper and slipped it into my jacket.

He rocked back again in his over-burdened boss’s chair, his fat oozing through the slats on the side. ‘You know, Dante,’ he began, ‘out west in Colorado or Montana, places like that where they still have cowboys and rodeos - not L.A. - out west; what do you think a cowboy does when he gets thrown off his horse? What does he do, Dante?’

It was a dumb question. ‘We’re talking here about a seventy-six-story horse,’ I said. ‘You asshole!’

There was an old Blarney Stone saloon across the street on the north side of Eighty-sixth, two doors from the Loew’s movie. They cashed Red Ball’s payroll checks. The place had a steam table and a pretty girl behind the food counter. Asian; Korean maybe, or Chinese. Red lipstick and lots of eye make-up.

I cashed my check. Me and Flash started with shooters, beer back. We talked. Mostly I talked, and watched the girl serving food. I put two twenties up on the bar. Flash put his own twenty up and we kept going.

Chapter Fifteen

GETTING A HACK license and becoming a taxi driver in New York City is not difficult. In fact it's not even necessary to know the city in order to get the license.

You take the subway downtown to Center Street to the Hack Bureau, fill out an application, pay a fee, then pick up a stack of photocopied sheets they give you that list the questions and answers that will appear on the hack exam; two hundred names and locations of hotels, hospitals, airports, and other prominent places. You study the material on your own time, then you come back to take a two-hour exam. The test is given every other week. You are permitted to repeat taking it until you come up with a grade of 60 percent or more. I was desperate to earn money so I memorized everything and got a passing grade my first time out.

Rodney Transportation was located near the docks in Hell's Kitchen, Fifty-fifth Street between Eleventh and Twelfth Avenue. The garage was a ten-minute walk from my rooming house at Fifty-first and Eighth. The boss/day dispatcher was a bad-tempered black guy, a mean little runt-prick named Shorty Smith.

Cabbies start early. Before dawn. My first day hacking I walked into the freezing garage where two hundred yellow cabs were parked. I waited in the long line until I got to the dispatcher's cage. Shorty assigned me cab number 7912, yelled that I should have the 'muthafucka' back by no later than 4 p.m., punched my trip card in the clocking machine, then roared, 'Next.'

It took five minutes to locate the cab buried deep in the yellow sea, then move half a dozen others to maneuver it out. 7912 had a full tank of gas but the inside was filthy, garbage on the floor, cigarette butts everywhere, gum wrappers, a half-empty, leaking take-out Chinese food container.

In order to get all four car doors open I had to back out onto the street. I let the motor continue running so the heater would take the chill from the passenger compartment. There was an oil-stained shirt in the trunk that I used as a rag to clean the floorboards. With wet and dry newspaper I did the windows, inside and out. I asked. Another driver said newspaper works better than anything. Ten minutes later I was ready to work.

I started out rounding the block on Twelfth Avenue, then heading east on Fifty-sixth Street. The cab's odometer showed over 130,000 miles. It was a late-model Dodge, less than two years old. I found out that most fleet taxis in New York run seven days a week, twenty hours a day.

The car's front shocks were completely gone. The front bumper, the dash, and everything else rattled. There was a moderate shimmy at twenty miles an hour. I tested the brakes. They pulled to the right.

My first fare hailed me from the corner of Eleventh Avenue and Forty-ninth Street. A guy going to the Bronx. Tremont Avenue. I'd learned the subways well enough. I'd driven the airport shuttle van back and forth from Kennedy and La Guardia to Manhattan a hundred times but I had little practical knowledge of how to get around the streets by car, so I said, 'I'm new. Can you direct me?' The guy said, 'Sure, turn left here.' Three months later I was an expert.

I started out working the day shift, ten-hour days, Monday and Tuesday off. I liked the job from the first. Liked having a steady income. I didn't have to talk to people and I was my own boss except for Shorty Smith.

If you want to make decent money hacking in New York, the first important information you learn is that you have to be behind the wheel driving 100 percent of the time. Moving. No lunch breaks. Eat what you want but eat it while you drive. No wasting time hanging around hotel cab lines hoping to get an expensive airport trip. You grind it out. One fare at a time. Forty to sixty fares a day. When you have to piss you use a milk carton or an empty coffee container and you pull over or piss while you drive.

Because of the job my drinking stayed under control. I had beers after work and on my days off but I managed to keep away from wine and the hard stuff. The depressions kept on but I managed okay. I was alone a lot but for me being alone was good.

Things changed. I liked driving, the freedom, the routine of going to work every day. But in time, off the sauce, I began to notice things; behavior that I didn't seem to have any control over.

I was in my second month of hacking when a thing happened: I had to stop and break my work rhythm that day by calling the Rodney administration office at the taxi garage. The payroll people had me down for one dependant only and were taking too much withholding from my pay. Another cabbie who had experience in these matters advised me that I was not claiming enough dependants, that they would take less money out if I claimed twelve to fifteen dependants, so I was calling in to alter my tax status.

Between Thirty-fourth Street and Eighty-sixth Street on Third Avenue there are pay phones every two blocks. They are mounted on poles next to each other and separated by a metal partition for privacy.

I pulled my cab over, double parked, pushed in the taxi's flasher signal, then clinked out some change in quarters and dimes from my change maker.

The first pay telephone I tried was out of order. I lost my coin. The phone next to the first one was broken too. I remember slamming that one down.

Back in my cab I drove the two blocks to the next phone stand, double parked and got out. The first paybox worked; I dialed my cab company's number and someone answered. I could hear the person I was speaking to, the receptionist, but she could not hear me. She kept saying, 'Hello, hello,' and finally hung up.

The phone on the stand next to the one with the bad connection felt light. The receiver part was missing components. I unscrewed the mouthpiece section to check. The interior metal voice gadget had been removed. Vandalized. I got back in my cab and moved on.

After arriving at Fortieth Street on Third Avenue, seven-in-a-row non-working units later, I located an instrument that appeared functional - the hearing and listening parts were both okay. But it turned out that the push-button dialing mechanism didn't work. Press any number other than zero and nothing happened. When I hit the zero by itself the operator came on and made the call for me.

Rodney's office answered. But the person in the payroll department that I had needed to speak with twenty minutes before was unavailable,

gone on a coffee break. The company receptionist twat hissed, 'Call back later,' then clicked off.

It was then that I yanked the hand piece with the cord completely out of the phone, flung it into a street garbage can and walked off.

Back sitting behind the wheel of cab number 7912, about to drive off, I remember having the thought: I hate the motherfucking fucking phone company!

Snapping on my taxi's OFF-DUTY switch, I returned to the paybox I'd just disabled. On the front of the phone I located the unit's stenciled pay phone number. I copied the number down.

As I found out, there are more than thirty pay phones between Forty-second and Eighty-sixth Street on Third Avenue. The main cross-town two-way streets, like Fifty-seventh and Seventy-second and Seventy-ninth and Eighty-sixth, have several units installed on each corner, not just two. I decided to report all the ones that didn't work.

Because I was in the middle of the busiest part of midtown New York, it wasn't that easy to stop, double park my cab, make my way to the phone stands, check each unit, then copy down the number along with a description of why each one of the damaged and vandalized cocksuckers was nonfunctioning. It took time. Over two hours. People would hail me, occasionally even try to get in when I'd be delayed at a red light. But I had my doors locked. I ignored all distractions.

When I got past Eighty-seventh Street on Third I considered the job done. The busy part of midtown technically ends at Eighty-sixth Street. I tallied the phone numbers I had written down then counted the torn-out handsets on the floorboard of my cab. The numbers corresponded. Eighteen.

I pulled over one final time, double parked at the next paybox stand. The unit was working okay. I punched zero. The operator answered, 'Operator.'

'There are eighteen non-working pay phones on Third Avenue in midtown,' I announced. 'I've copied the telephone numbers down and I want to report them.'

There was a funny interval of dead air but I could hear breathing on the other end. Finally I said, 'Are you there? Hello?'

‘...Sir...I’m here. Go ahead.’

‘I’m trying to give you the numbers and information on out-of-order pay telephones on Third Avenue. Pay telephones that belong to your company. This is AT&T isn’t it? Are you with me here?’

Another pause, then, ‘Go ahead, sir.’

‘Should I be speaking to a supervisor or a repair person?’

‘...I’m okay...Report ‘em to me...How many you say?’

‘Eighteen. Are you ready?’

‘Go ahead, sir...I just say go ahead.’

‘Okay,’ I began, ‘at Forty-first and Third on the southeast corner is where your first non-operational piece of phone crap is located. I lifted the receiver off the hook and nothing happened. No tone. Dead air. Zip. The number on that piece-of-junk unit is 212-473-4407. Okay?’

Again dead air.

‘You there, operator?’

‘...Sir, go ahead.’

‘I didn’t know if you were still there. You should say something. That way I know you’re still there and I’m speaking to a living, alert homo sapien.’

‘...Next, sir.’

‘Next is number two. Number two follows number one and is also located at Forty-first and Third on the southeast corner. That paybox number is 212-473-4887. Somebody’d ripped off both the earpiece and the mouthpiece on that malfunctioning piece of dog crap. Okay?’

‘Sir, I just need the numbers...you gonna give up the numbers?’

‘That’s what I’m doing. But I’m also reporting the existing problem with the unit, and the location.’

‘Just give up the number.’

I kept going after that, without pausing, listing only the telephone numbers on the broken boxes. When I was done I said, ‘That’s it. That’s all eighteen.’

No response.

‘Operator,’ I said, ‘that’s it. That’s the last one. I’m done...Hello?’

‘...Okay, you done?’

‘Yes. I just said that was the last one. Did you get all of them? All the numbers?’

There was no reply. She'd hung up.

Chapter Sixteen

AFTER THE DEAL with the pay phones things went back to normal for a few weeks. But within me, more and more, I was becoming aware that I was crazy. My mind, my thoughts, attacked me constantly. Old incidents and humiliations from years before got re-viewed like the newsreel footage of rotting concentration camp bodies. My insatiable sexual behavior, my blackouts and drunkenness; all of it. I would be driving the streets in my cab and the pictures would come back again and again. Sometimes I'd have to pull over, pound the steering wheel, curse myself and scream out loud until the noise stopped.

An entire week was spent in my mind reenacting the five-minute occasion of my firing from the Night Manager gig at the East End Hotel. The embarrassment of being caught out by the ass-licking Shi, being talked down to by Mistofsky. Every remark was gone over, every phrase, every glance analyzed and replayed again and again. I became unable to focus on anything else.

My sleep got down to an hour or two a night again. I went back on the booze. Often it took a fifth to two fifths of Ten High at night after work to shut the noise off.

At the diner on Twelfth Avenue where I got my coffee every morning and where many of the cabbies from the Rodney garage ate, they had a new waitress, Betty. She was my height, five-five or five-six, but she easily weighed four hundred pounds. So fat, I noticed, that she was unable to fit properly behind her side of the counter. She had to scooch sideways like a huge crab in order to serve her customers. The vastness of the lard clinging to her caused her to huff and wheeze and snort as she oozed along.

After seeing her there for two mornings in a row my mind could not leave the shock of her fat alone. I found myself unable to stop staring at Betty. Studying her. Why, I said to myself, why in fucking punctured Jesus would Milt, the owner, hire such an odious, absurd, pig-faced amalgam of

dog shit? Did he think that his cab driver clientele would put up with a sweaty-chested, belching, rhinoceros-butted blimp, dripping perspiration and body smell, serving their meatloaf and tuna salad sandwiches? What the possible fuck could his reasoning be for having her around?

I was paying Milt for my coffee and buttered bagel at the register and eyeballing the aberrant monstrosity when my mind went ‘external’ before I could stop it. ‘Milt,’ I blurted, pointing, slamming my dollar and change down to pay, ‘is that new?’

‘What?’

‘That...human.’

‘Yeah,’ he said, skewering my check on the paper spike by the register, ‘Claire quit. Moved to Fort Lee. Better schools for her kids. That’s Betty.’

‘Okay, but why...why did you hire...that?’

‘That’s name is Betty.’

I leaned toward him to speak confidentially. The thing was traversing the counter a dozen or so feet away, grunting and snorting, refilling a customer’s coffee cup, raising and lowering its eighty-pound arm to reveal a huge dark circle of sweat. Beads of moistness coated its massive cheeks and hog snout. ‘Milt,’ I said, ‘Your Betty is the fattest fucking bloated distended pile of living waste I have ever seen. What the hell is she doing here... around normal people?’

‘She’s my niece.’

I had to go on. It was impossible to stop myself. ‘There should be fucking legislation about keeping something that sickening out of sight.’

‘Soo...you don’t like fat people?’

‘That’s not *people*, that’s oil mountain! That huge bitch is a rolling vat of bacteria, a living, wheezing, farting health department violation. Man, don’t you know that it’s physically impossible for a fucking hippo her size to reach her feet with a bar of soap, let alone her twat and private parts?’

Milt pushed my change across the counter. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘don’t come back in here again. Take your coffee business somewhere else.’

I scooped the coins up. Consciously, somewhere in my brain, I was aware that I’d lost it completely. ‘Let me ask you a question,’ I bellowed. ‘What the fuck do you think a lard-globe that huge has to do to have sex? To procreate. How does it fuck? A person would have to have a twenty-inch dick to have intercourse with an elephant brontosaurus of her dimensions.’

Milt was walking away.

‘Hey,’ I yelled again, pushing the paper bag containing the coffee and bagel back across the counter and off the end so that it fell to the floor, broke open and spilled, ‘fuck you, zoo keeper! Fuck you and her and all the pig-animal infected human hogs everywhere!’

Milt perused me, untying his apron and coming around from behind the counter. But I was too quick; out the door and down the street to my taxi.

Chapter Seventeen

A COUPLE OF days later, after the diner deal, I'd knocked off early and pulled into the mechanics section of the Rodney garage to have Hot Rod work on my front brakes. Another driver, a night-shift guy everybody knew, Al Bridhoff, was there too having some tranny work done. Al had once gone to law school upstate. Albany or somewhere. He was now the garage shylock. Because he had power and controlled money, many of the Rodney cabbies went to him for advice.

We were talking and drinking vending-machine coffee when I decided to mention the telephone incident and Betty at the diner and some of the stuff my mind had been saying to me.

But right away I regretted bringing it up.

Bridhoff was a pipe smoker. I began telling him what had happened and he began trying to light his fucking pipe. I'd say something, then he'd start to reply but stop in the middle, attempt to relight the pipe twenty-eight more fucking times, then nod that we could go on. I felt like the chump, the mooch, groveling for this asshole's magical syllables of insight. In less than five minutes I hated him and hated myself for initiating the conversation.

When I'd said what I had to say, Bridhoff sat down. He could see that I was annoyed at having to watch him with his moron pipe. He scratched his cheek thoughtfully and attempted to give the appearance of contemplation. 'Well, sport,' he said finally, playing with the lid on his Zippo lighter, clicking the top up and down, 'it sounds like you've been overdoing it just a bit.'

I didn't answer. A dented cab fender had more intelligence than this shylock imbecile fuck.

Disgusted, I threw my half-full coffee cup in the garbage, and began walking away. Bridhoff stopped me, putting his hand up like a crossing guard. 'Hey,' he said, 'tell me what you did with all the telephone parts, the receivers and cords? Still have that stuff?'

'No. It was broken junk. I threw it away.'

'Evidence, huh?'

‘No. Junk. Not evidence of any kind. Useless fucking junk.’

‘Yeah, well, that wasn’t very good thinking, was it? Telephone equipment has value. I might’ve been able to help you there.’

‘There’s a dumpster in the alley behind my rooming house. The valuable telephone shit you’re looking for is under a cat carcass and six feet of garbage. Help yourself, sport.’

A day or two later something else happened. More insanity.

I was hacking. On Madison Avenue in the Eighties about to pull over and pick up a guy hailing me, when another hack in a Checker cab cut me off to get to a fare. I had to slam on my brakes to avoid hitting his taxi.

The fare got in the other guy’s Checker.

I pulled up next to the cabbie and yelled something and he mouthed ‘Fuck you’ and gave me the finger.

No big deal. Normally I’d just let it go. It can happen a couple of times a week when you’re hacking but, for some reason, I flipped out and lost control.

I followed the other taxi, yelling shit, tailgating, screaming out my window.

After a few blocks he swerved between cars and I was forced to stop for a light. Seeing that I’d caught the signal, he went ahead to his destination, assuming that because he’d gotten away the incident was over. But I kept my eyes on his taillights. Saw him turn. I caught up.

He had pulled to the curb after making his drop on Sixty-first Street, around the corner from the Pierre Hotel.

That’s when we settled up.

A lot of cab drivers I knew carried weapons; guns or mace or pepper spray. I didn’t. I carried a baseball bat under my front seat. A Louisville Slugger.

I walked up quickly. The other guy was looking down, still filling out his trip record. I attacked his window. Slam! Slam! Slam! putting a million spiderweb cracks in the windshield’s safety glass. Then I did the back and the side glass.

There would have been no witnesses too because the prick couldn’t see me through the opaque glass, and he was too shocked and scared to do

anything about it but, as I was getting back into my cab, looking around, I recognized one of the drivers from my garage waiting alone in his cab at the hack stand in front of the Pierre. He saw me too, then he looked away.

A couple of nights later I was checking out with Shorty Smith, leaving the dispatch window, counting my tips, when Al Bridhoff patted me on the back. 'Hey, "Batman,"' he said. 'Take it slow out there tonight.'

There were a dozen guys standing around the shape-up room. They all laughed. From then on I had a new name at the Rodney garage.

Chapter Eighteen

THE GOOD PART was that hacking kept me constantly busy. I was making money. I'd acquired a new electric typewriter to work on my play, a color TV.

Then something happened that triggered something else that put me over the edge: Shorty Smith had graduated me to what in the taxi business they call a 'single' - one long twelve- to fourteen-hour shift. No night guy. Just me. I was allowed to choose my own time slot; 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., six days a week. Sundays off.

It was early June, 8:30 a.m., drizzling a smelly rain in stop-and-go traffic. I was maneuvering my cab back up Eighth Avenue in the Thirties after a drop at Penn Station, staying to the east side of the street, barely making the staggered lights, preparing to avoid the stampede of commuters who would be flagging me down as I approached the Port Authority Bus Terminal at Thirty-ninth Street.

The cab was sweltering. A morning summer rain had made the humidity worse. The Dodge's temperature gauge showed three-quarters to the bright orange/red 'HOT' area. Already the back of my shirt was wet with sweat, stuck to the seat.

My plan at that time of the morning was to make my way empty uptown into the Seventies on Central Park West, get my next fare, drop them in midtown or downtown, then repeat the process. Uptown downtown, uptown downtown, until the end of rush hour.

After I passed Forty-first Street, traffic opened up. Rolling by the commuter hotels more frantic hands waved at me; a whistle blew from a red-faced doorman. I slowed but when I saw garment bags and suitcases stacked next to the guy on the curb, I punched the gas pedal again. No airport runs. Not at rush hour. It would mean a dead hit all the way back from Kennedy.

Crossing Forty-fifth and Eighth, a black guy stepped out from between parked cars, hailing me. I let up on the gas to check him out. A second guy, behind guy number one, was on the curb carrying an A & P shopping bag

filled with groceries. The two looked like working men. Hotel employees. The night shift. I guessed their destination as Harlem or Washington Heights. It could be a parlay. Perfect. I'd drop them uptown then catch a long hit back down into midtown. So, flicking my 'OFF DUTY' light off, I pulled over.

But they'd been in the taxi for under a minute when I knew; the first guy did the talking, flat, inflectionless: 'One-eighteenth and Manhattan Avenue.'

I threw the meter flag and twisted my way back into traffic, but I knew. Cab drivers know. My groin and stomach suddenly felt like they'd been punctured by the dirty blade of a pocket knife. This was a hold-up. These guys were going to do me.

My brain clicked to the word 'fuck' and screamed it at me over and over.

Guy number one, the talking guy, was sitting directly in back of me. He leaned forward against the plastic partition to give more instructions. 'Into the park,' he said. 'Go in at Fifty-ninth Street. Come out uptown. Hundred and tenth street. Lenox Avenue...understand?'

I saw his eyes locked on me in the rear-view mirror. Dead eyes. Dead face. The gray lips moved but beyond that movement there was nothing alive. Guy number two stayed silent, staring at the back of the front seat. I knew it. I was fucked.

The route that number one had told me to take was circuitous, the long way. It was the way I would choose if me and another robber scumbag had decided we were going to take off a cabbie. By going his way there would be no interference. The uptown Central Park roadway was abandoned in morning rush hour. The fear that had jabbed my guts now worked its way up into my chest and down my arms.

'That's the wrong way,' I mouthed. 'Eighth Avenue and up Central Park West is the best way. Faster.'

Again Dead Face leaned up against the open partition window; a pull-cord zombie doll. 'Yo,' he hissed, 'jus take the fucking park. Jus do what I say...take the park.'

Two blocks later we reached the turn-off entrance to the park at Fifty-ninth Street. I knew that if I entered the northbound drive there would be no

chance for me at all. I chose not to turn, instead steering around the monument at Columbus Circle and heading north on Central Park West.

‘Man,’ came the voice from behind me, ‘what’s your fucking problem?’

‘I told you,’ I came back, ‘the park is the wrong way.’

‘Pull-the-fuck over, man. Do it...Stop here!’

We were between Sixtieth and Sixty-first streets on Central Park West. I rolled up beside a line of parked cars while my two passengers exchanged whispers.

What they did after that seemed choreographed. They both got out at the same time. The one on my side, Dead Face, took up a position by my driver’s window while the other dude moved to the front passenger door and began miming for me to roll the glass down further.

Dead Face talked across the roof of the cab to number two, sneering; ‘Pay this motherfucker, man. Let’s get us another cab.’ Their A & P groceries bag was still on my back seat.

Then I had the thought that I might be wrong, that guy number two at the passenger window was standing there intending to pay me, dealing straight. I saw his hand go into his pants pocket as if to get his money and an automatic reaction made me glance at my meter then call out the fare: ‘Two fifty.’

Later on, as I went over and over the incident in my brain, I realized that that was the moment the fuckers had me. It was a move, a feint, all part of the score. I’d been distracted. The idea was for me to take my eyes away from Dead Face.

A second later his knife was at my throat, his body leaning in through the window blocking the view of pedestrians, people in other cars.

His sweet breath was on my cheek and forehead. ‘My man,’ he whispered, ‘make one fucking sound and you die!...Anything stupid and you die.’

I didn’t move. I didn’t talk.

My paper money was kept in a cigar box on the seat, my coins in my steel change-maker attached to the car’s dashboard.

Then I saw the second guy’s weapon. A gun. Short. A small-caliber automatic.

The whole deal lasted a few seconds. The blade of the shank stayed pressed tightly against my neck while number two crawled across the seat, shifted the cab's transmission up into 'park', turned the engine off, removed the car keys, and threw them out the door. Then number two scooped out my cash from the cigar box on the seat and unfastened the change-maker.

Dead Face took my wristwatch. A cheap watch. That done, he reached down and worked my wallet up and out from my rear pants pocket.

Then he traded weapons with the other guy and pressed the muzzle of the little pistol hard to the side of my head. 'Face down on the seat, motherfucker. One word and you die.'

I hesitated for a second because I knew that if they had made plans to kill me it would happen while I was in that position. The feeling of the pressure of the gun's muzzle digging into my temple took a week to go away.

They exchanged whispers and then I felt something else, a pressure, like being poked, but no pain.

Then they were gone. Down a subway entrance or over the wall into Central Park.

That's when I saw the blood. Soaking my sleeve and the right side of my shirt. On the seat. Two separate fat red streams coursing around the sides of the empty cigar box then pooling where the front seat cushions come together.

I didn't feel hurt. I felt nothing, only electricity in my arms and the hammering of my heart in my chest.

In the rear-view mirror I located my cheek and neck, then reached back to the source of the injury; a two inch gash, high on my neck behind my right ear. Not a big cut. It didn't seem that deep either. But the blood flowed freely, quickly covering my palm and fingers.

I held the hand out to study it. The red stream looked as thick as motor oil. Fat drops fell on the vinyl seat below.

I was sitting on the curb near the open rear door of my cab, smoking, talking to the police, holding a thick wad of gauze up to my head to soak up the blood while I waited for the ambulance. One of the cops noticed the sack of A & P groceries still on the back seat. 'Theirs?' he asked.

I nodded.

The other cop pulled the bag out of the car. When he saw how light it was, he cackled. The three of us looked inside. On top, sticking out above the rim of the bag, were a milk carton, an egg box, a cornflakes box, and a cardboard orange-juice container. All empty, either taped closed or upside down. Beneath the upper layer of decoys was twelve inches of wadded up newspaper.

The one cop sneered. 'Pretty slick.'

'Yeah,' said the other cop, 'slicker than shit.'

Chapter Nineteen

IT TOOK TWELVE stitches to sew my head up. After the Emergency Room I was prescribed Fiorinal with codeine for pain, Valium to calm me down. I asked for refills so they gave me one each.

The hold-up changed me. I trembled involuntarily several times a day but I knew I'd get over that. The big change was that I had completely stopped giving a shit. I now drank without any moderation whatever.

The union rep from the Rodney garage came by my rooming house with medical forms. It was nine o'clock in the morning. I was blasted and stayed blasted. The next day someone else from the taxi company delivered a payroll check to my room. Two weeks of union-approved medical leave. \$515.

Black sludge began seeping into every part of my brain. I stayed as drunk as possible and ate the Valium and Fiorinal.

The garage union guy came back with more forms. I knew he was there. Outside my door. Knocking. Calling my name. I didn't answer. He left more envelopes and papers with Bert, the rooming-house manager.

I was filling a deep hole. Every day a fifth by lunchtime, from the bottle, like medicine. My goal was 'numb.' The whiskey worked good.

A week went by. Then two.

My shaking was gone but I knew there was no way I would ever drive a cab again. I was done.

On Seventh Avenue in Times Square there was an Oriental Massage that employed all Korean girls - thirty bucks for the hour. The secret to Korean masseuse hookers is the tip; the more you tip the girl the more she does. I always gave a twenty-dollar bill as soon as I got in.

I'd come in drunk but not too drunk. My girl called herself Sandy. A wonderful slut. Sandy's American was lousy but she liked drinking with

me, loved sweet wine. That and the twenty-dollar tip and she would do anything, lick me wherever I wanted. Anything. As much as I wanted.

Her shift began at one in the afternoon every day so that's the time I would show up. Being first was important to me. I always wanted to be her first.

Even that stopped working.

Chapter Twenty

THE UNION GUY told me that my first Temporary Disability check would come any day. But I was in trouble, overpowered by depression. It wouldn't go away. Now it didn't matter how much alcohol I drank, I could no longer get drunk. All it did was dull me, make me slow-witted, but not drunk.

At night until four or five o'clock or until I could doze off, I'd watch TV; re-reruns of day-time talk shows, mindless bunk. Fat people who had fucked other fat people's sisters or aunts or best friends coming on TV to confess and scream. The best part was the commercials, the home gadgets and infomercials. Exercise gadgets and diet machines invented by guys who'd written books and knew everything.

SEA-MATION is a service I'd see advertised all the time. The gimmick is cremation plus burial at sea. All in one: SEA-MATION. A fellow with a grey toupee gives the pitch while they continue flashing the 800 phone number of the company on the bottom of the screen.

SEA-MATION had a sale going, a 'pre-need special.' Ordering now saved you ninety-nine ninety-five. One week only.

I called the flashing 800 telephone number. 'Hello,' the voice said. 'SEA-MATION, Mike speaking. May I have your area code first, then your telephone number...'

I was using the rooming house's hall pay phone but I gave him the number anyway.

'Your name, sir?'

'Bruno...Bruno Dante. D...A...N...T...E.'

'Thank you for calling SEA-MATION, Mr. Dante. How may I assist you this morning?'

'I saw your commercial on the TV, Mike.'

'Our pre-need special, "Passage to Serenity." Five hundred and ninety-nine dollars?'

'Yeah...the one on TV. The sale.'

‘I’ll need to get some preliminary information, Mr. Dante. Do you have a few minutes to do that with me?’

‘That’s why I called. I’m an interested caller, Mike.’

‘Well, good, sir. Excellent...Now, would our services be for yourself or a family member?’

‘The services would be for me, Mike. Myself. Bruno.’

‘Thank you for considering SEA-MATION to sustain you in your final resting arrangements, Mr. Dante. Pre-need planning, of course, is the sensible and economical option to the high cost of a sudden-need situation. Most importantly, pre-need planning eliminates confusion for your survivors at what can be a very anxious time, as I’m sure you would agree.’

‘I agree, Mike...Let’s keep going.’

‘Now, about the specifics of your requirements, Mr. Dante?...’

‘Go ahead, Mike. Go ahead and ask.’

‘Is there a time factor involved in scheduling your pre-need, Mr. Dante?’

‘What time factor, Mike?’

‘I’m sorry...I wasn’t being clear...What I mean is, have you been advised as to how soon you’ll be needing services?’

‘When I’m going to die?’

‘Yes, sir. That’s correct.’

‘Okay. I see...Tomorrow, Mike. Tomorrow morning.’

‘...I’m very sorry, Mr. Dante...I’m sure that was difficult news. May I please have the name and telephone number of your attending physician? Full name. First name first, please...’

‘I don’t have an attending physician, Mike.’

‘...Name of hospital or facility and room number, please?’

‘I’m not in the hospital or in a facility.’

‘...I see...Mr. Dante, I’m sorry for asking this at such an uncomfortable time, but could you tell me the nature of your illness?’

‘Okay...sure...I refilled my prescription for Valium today. I took a handful before I called you, about twenty or so...’

‘Wait...You just took *pills*?’

‘About five minutes ago. I was on hold listening to the music. I’m drinking too...I’ll be taking the last thirty - they’re ten-milligram Valium -

and twenty-five Fiorinal, after we hang up. I'm going to kill myself. So...I guess my illness is an overdose. To be safe, if I were you, I'd just put down heart failure. That'll cover it.'

On the other end Mike had stopped reading from his telephone script.

'C'mon sir,' he said, 'you're not serious?...You're kidding, right?'

'No. I'm being serious. It's checkout time.'

'Look...Bruno. It's Bruno, right?'

'Right.'

'Look Bruno. This's like...absurd. You seem to be an intelligent person. I mean, you sound a little stoned and all but...did you really take twenty Valium?...Hey, wait; is this Robert? Godammit man, don't screw around!...'

'I took pills, Mike. Ten minutes ago. I'm about to take some more. I haven't got much time here...'

'Shit!...Okay, look...Bruno, Mr. Dante...let me get my supervisor. I don't know what to say. This is an exceptional circumstance. I'm going to put you on hold a second, okay?'

'No. Don't do that. I need to know now.'

'...Jesus...Look, I mean, you're absolutely positive about this?'

'Yes...Correct.'

'Well, shit. Jesus...You're really going through with it?'

'It's a done deal.'

'...Okay...Mr. Dante...Okay. Well...I didn't mention yet that there's an additional bonus discount of ten percent off our TV special if you pay right now over the phone with your Visa or Mastercard? Did you want to take advantage of that discount?'

Chapter Twenty-one

IN NEW YORK State there is a law that says that they are allowed to lock you down in the squirrel ward for ten days when you attempt to take your own life. It doesn't matter if you ate pills and cut your wrists, drank drain cleaner or injected 200 ccs of nail polish remover into your carotid artery. If you live, they've got you. The rules are the same for everybody. Dylan, my high-strung faggot neighbor across the hall who always hears everything anyway, heard my end of the phone call to SEA-MATION at five o'clock in the morning. I found out later that he's the one that called 911 after I'd gone back to my room and locked the door. I don't remember any of it. Not the ambulance. Nothing.

In New York Hospital they assigned me to Jack Bratter. A shrink. Jack's job was to bring me in twice a day for private sessions, ask a lot of questions and determine if I was crazy and a danger to myself. He would evaluate whether or not I should be let go or placed in a rubber condo somewhere. I didn't care. I didn't give a rat's dick what they did with me.

Jack was a good guy. Older, but smart. He had been a desk sergeant in Manhattan South for twelve years before retiring from the police. He'd gone back to school at Hunter College, then taken up shrink as a profession. He liked that I was a writer. He had read some of my father's books. We talked a lot about plays. His theatrical interest was in classic theatrical comedy; Molière, guys like that.

I told Jack the truth. Mostly. I said things had come to a head after the hold-up. The despair, et cetera.

Jack was more concerned about my drinking than anything else. Also about my anger fits while I was drinking and sober. He was curious to know the kinds of things that set me off; what I thought about this and what I thought about that: 'What did you think then, Bruno?...After that happened, how did you feel?...You must've been upset.' Blah, blah, blah...Blah, blah, blah.

One week into the deal, after the individual sessions and twice-a-day in group, Jack gave me some news. 'Good news,' he said. He had determined that I was not crazy. That the twenty-four-hour-a-day voices in my head and my behavior were, to him, symptoms of alcoholism.

According to Jack, being an alcoholic is a mind disease like manic depression. It describes the way an alkie's mind has come to work. Sober or drunk. He said that my depressions and rages and disgusting degenerate behavior and the other stuff were by-products of my alcoholism.

Alkies, Jack says, are characterized not only by their drinking, which of course is the main big symptom, but also by their craziness while they are sober. After a certain point in the progression of the disease a person's perceptions change. There is an automatic mental distortion of information; damaged, fucked mental software. With and without a drink.

Jack says that I had developed this type of 'personality' over time. A new character. To keep my mind comfortable and under control, my disease required me to drink more and more because things in the world become more and more unacceptable with my type of alcoholic 'personality.'

Booze, Jack says, can work real well for years, like a pill, to treat this personality. But eventually it has to turn on you, stop working, and bite you on the ass. According to Jack, that's what happened to me.

He said this: that there was nothing really he could do to help me stop the depressions or trying to kill myself. In his experience, still-drinking alcoholics like me, as a functioning, walking-around class of people, are the furthest from any kind of emotional or spiritual peace. From God.

At the end of the mandatory ten days, on the morning of my release from the hospital, Jack said that if I continued with booze I would be like someone carrying cans of gasoline to a fire. He said there wasn't much hope.

I liked Jack. They were letting me out and they could no longer hold me for any reason so I was completely straight with him. I said honestly that I did not agree. To me I was chemically imbalanced. I needed some kind of medication; Prozac or Elavil or lithium. One of those. Other people on my ward who took mood stabilizers had my same symptoms. Jack refused to give me anything to help so I got up and walked out.

Chapter Twenty-two

ME AND MY rooming-house manager, Bert, had always gotten on fairly well. Bert was part Indian. American Indian. Big and mean but he liked me because we both drank whiskey and we were both fans of the New York Mets.

He'd arrived in Manhattan five years before me with his old lady Angel-Lee and their two kids. At the time the couple met and started a relationship he was forty-one, Angel was nineteen. She had been a dancer, the prettiest black girl in Fort Smith.

For his first few years in New York Bert worked in construction assembly, steel framing on skyscrapers. Then, by chance, he discovered his real aptitude; the one for insurance scams and welfare swindling.

One day at the job site he slipped on a cable spool, fell, and got a minor strain in his back. He decided to fake it a little and take a few days off to watch the end of the baseball playoffs on TV. His job foreman sent him to a doctor. There in the waiting room Bert ran into a guy he had once worked with. Another Indian. The guy had a limp and was walking with a cane but he was wearing a colorful Hawaiian sports shirt. In their conversation it came out that the fellow had been collecting \$540 tax free every two weeks for the last year for his own back injury. Currently, he was spending his afternoons making bets and limping up and down the steps to the Club House at Aqueduct racetrack.

That was the beginning.

Three years later Bert was deep into a Workman's Comp lawsuit and opening his mail twice a month to find over a thousand dollars' worth of checks from the insurance company. His bogus back-injury claim had begun that day at the doctor's office. These days Bert spent his time drinking whiskey and Rheingold beer, watched the Mets on TV, and, as an under-the-table sideline, managing the rooming house where I lived.

He and Angel had never officially married so she was on welfare as an unemployed single mother. Her own second income came from a steady

night gig, waitressing in a titty bar off Times Square. The girls, twins, Carrie and Connie, were now eleven years old. Nice kids. Sweet.

Bert knew about my hold-up in the taxi. It was he and my neighbor Dylan who had unlocked my door to let the police and the paramedics in after I tried to kill myself by taking the Valium and pain pills.

The afternoon I got back from the hospital and knocked on his door to get my mail and pay my back rent, Bert asked me inside. He always had beer, good and cold, so I stepped in.

During one of the commercials Bert smiled over at me and slapped his leg. He asked me if I had ever heard of Victim Stress Disorder. I said that I had not. Then he began to laugh. It continued for several seconds. When he stopped he was standing over my chair and pointing down. He said that to him, the second after I'd opened his front door, he knew. I looked like a man with incurable Victim Stress Disorder. For the rest of the afternoon we talked about VSD and drank and watched the Mets lose.

Bert's attorney was Robert Edward Francis Duffy. Duffy's office was on Twenty-third Street in the Flatiron Building. He practiced one kind of law only: work-related personal injury. Workman's Comp lawsuits.

Bert bragged that Duffy had an address book overflowing with the names of orthopedists, shrinks and miscellaneous personal-injury experts. He said that if he wanted to Duffy could have six doctors in a courtroom tomorrow morning at eight o'clock who would testify under oath and certify that I was unemployable and crazier than a blue chicken.

The following morning I went with Bert, who had ambitions of collecting a referral fee, downtown to see Bob Duffy at his office. It turned out that attorney Duffy had settled two prior cabbie hold-up claims using Victim Stress Disorder as the basis for the lawsuits. The first trauma case was similar to mine; a guy had been robbed at gunpoint, shoved into his cab's trunk and left freezing for twelve hours in a parking lot in Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn. Duffy'd won a juicy award from Workman's Comp because of permanent frostbite damage to three of the man's fingers and chronic VSD. The guy's name was Joseph Kallit. Eventually Kallit moved with his mother and his wife Louise to Florida, where they purchased a

condo with their end of the settlement money and he took up playing the trombone.

Me and Bert sat in the two leather chairs in front of Duffy's desk while the lawyer ran down a list of Victim Stress Disorder symptoms. The three of us counted. Five of the symptoms applied to me. I signed up right there and became a client.

Before we left the office Duffy got on the phone and made an appointment for me to begin regular therapy sessions and counseling with a doctor - Doctor Gromis. The way it worked, he said, was that Gromis would immediately submit my forms and I could expect to receive my first Workman's Comp benefit check in a week to ten days. \$232 a week. \$928 per month. Indefinitely. Duffy announced that I now had a chronic, medically documented case of Victim Stress Disorder.

Chapter Twenty-three

DOCTOR GROMIS HAD thick eyebrows and brown stains on his teeth from smoking cigars. He was skinny and smaller than me. His specialty was working with Viet Nam vet cases; Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the more modern ailments they'd come up with like my VSD.

Both of us knew why we were there: (A) for me to pad my case, and (B) for him to bill my insurance company the hundred bucks an hour. Gromis said there were three rules: I was to show up on time for my sessions, not leave early, and not miss more than two in a row. At the end of our meeting he stood up, shook my hand, and said it would be okay for me to call him Harry.

My appointment time was 11 a.m., Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. There were four other guys in my group therapy sessions; Olivers and Watkins, who always came in together, Doyle Kopek, and Lance Arvidson with his racing bike with the broken spokes. Plus Harry. All VA guys except me.

Kopek 'shared' the most and monopolized the sessions. Nonsense, predominately. To me he was a wack and a blubberfuck with the need to go on for half an hour at a time about boring idiot minutiae like the details of an argument with an old woman on a subway or a cheesedick beef with his mother regarding the correct divvy of his VA allotment checks.

Then there was Olivers. A completely bizarre person. He either owned three blue tee-shirts with the same hole in the sleeve or never changed the only one he had. He kept his hair long in cornrows and wore sunglasses to all the therapy sessions. His weirdest and most annoying characteristic was his continual rubbing and clutching at his penis. When he did talk it was to bitch about his medical condition or discuss something he'd seen on TV.

Lance Arvidson was quiet too. A nodder. He'd sit for whole sessions without speaking. Sometimes he'd mumble something or snicker at something stupid Kopek had shared but his main system for communicating appeared to be head movements of the Yes or No kind.

The last guy, Watkins, had been a guard at Riker's Island. A big, mean-spirited weightlifter prick. Always going off at someone for something; jumping out of his chair, intentionally misinterpreting everything you said if you were white, talking shit and getting in people's face every chance he could.

One week into the deal I hated them all. Except for Harry. To continue showing up but to keep from going crazy I was back on the booze again full time. Several times I came in drunk and dozed off during the sessions.

Harry called me into his office to inquire what was going on. I told him that it was clear to me that I had nothing in common with his astronauts. He wanted to know what else so I told him. I was honest. I said that I was back at the point again where I didn't give a rat's dick whether I lived or died.

He wanted me to quit drinking and said that he'd had some luck treating Viet Nam vets through hypnotism and wanted to know if I was willing to give that form of therapy a try.

I thought about it and said no.

Harry gave me a choice: I could go back to attorney Duffy and get hooked up with a new shrink and return to square one with the Workman's Comp deal or I could try the hypno sessions.

The day I arrived for my first treatment, the office receptionist and nurse, Ms. Venable, put me into a room I had never been in before; it was small with no carpet and no windows. The only furniture in the room was a vinyl-covered tan reclining chair against one wall. When I touched one of the arms, it felt sticky. Ms. Venable gave me a blackout patch for my eyes and a set of earphones. I put the stuff on and pushed back in the recliner. As she was leaving I heard her flick off the light switch.

A few seconds later, from somewhere remote, she must have hit another button because a voice in my headset started talking. It was Harry recorded on tape: 'You are going deeper and deeper,' Harry's voice said. 'You are more and more relaxed. All tension is being released while you drift further and further onto a flat, tranquil, blue sea...Deeper and deeper.'

Different sessions had different themes. Sometimes Harry's voice had me on an airplane, looking out at a perfect cloudless sky listening to the

humming of the jet engines while I experienced increasing drowsiness. Sometimes I'd be in a train watching the sunset and listening to the clacking of the wheels...clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack. Once, in one of the clack-clack recordings, I saw a large fat bird flapping away into the distance. A big, noisy crow.

I never heard any messages of indoctrination coming through the headphones because after the first five or ten minutes of listening I was completely unconscious. I would wake up an hour later with Ms. Venable tapping me on the arm.

Chapter Twenty-four

I WAS SURPRISED when the hypnotism suddenly worked. It took two weeks. There was one small seizure the day after I stopped the booze, and a shaking fit the next but, other than those, I was fine. After my fourth week in Harry's chair with the earphones, in an evaluation, I told him that #1, I had lost all desire for alcohol (which was true), and #2, I seemed to have given up most of my thoughts about killing myself or anyone else. Harry was pleased but insisted that we continue with the hypnotism treatments.

Then things changed again.

One afternoon, on an off day from the chair and headphones, I was waiting in the lounge of the Oriental Massage in Times Square; waiting to spend an hour with Sandy, the pretty Korean hooker. The day before I'd cashed my second Workman's Comp check. Another two hundred and thirty-two bucks. Having quit alcohol I was celebrating receiving the money by letting myself get a massage and a blow job, then going to the movies to eat buttered popcorn and watch the newest Clint Eastwood.

It was a few minutes past one o'clock. Sandy always started work at one. I knew that. I had paid my up-front massage money and I was sitting in the lobby waiting.

Time passed and I had to pee. The woman behind the partition with the plastic window was also Korean and spoke bad American. She let me know that Sandy would be along. 'Pretty soon. Sandy come soon. You wait. Pretty soon.'

Some more time went by with me still sitting in the lobby and no Sandy. I returned to the plastic window and asked to be let inside to use the john. The lady smiled and nodded, but misunderstood what I was asking, so I went back and sat down.

Then a guy came in. An older guy in a dark suit and tie. Asian. But he didn't sit down.

When the partition lady saw the guy in the suit she got up, left her stool, and disappeared back inside.

A minute later Sandy opened the door and came out into the lobby, which was unusual because I'd never seen any of the girls come out front. Like always, she smiled and looked sexy and beautiful. Like always, she was in her black silk robe with the black panties underneath. But my favorite thing with Sandy, the real turn-on, was her red red lipstick.

While the other guy stood there, she came over and sat down next to me on the couch, grabbed my hand, kissed me, and pressed the hard little nipple of her tit into my upper arm.

She was whispering. She wanted me to know how very happy she was to see me again. She giggled about missing me and my funny jokes.

Then she kissed me again, harder this time, deeper, sliding her tongue under my tongue. After the kiss she looked up at me - she had big eyes. Sandy wanted to know if I would mind coming back later that day, or maybe even later that night. She was sorry, she said, the man in the suit was a very big tipper. Japanese. He didn't like waiting. If she didn't take him right away ahead of me he would leave and she would lose a very big and impressive tip. Then she kissed me again and handed me back my massage fee - a twenty and a ten; 'You come back later. Okay, baby?'

I looked up at the guy, standing there with his arms crossed staring at the ceiling, impatient, like some spoiled jerkoff waiting in front of the Plaza Hotel for his limo.

My mind started talking. First it suggested that I act nice and just get up and leave. Be a good guy. Walk out. No problem. Sandy would be grateful and when I came back next time she would demonstrate her thanks by doing some special sexual favor for me. But that message was overridden by a second quick message. The new message said: 'Fuck these cocksuckers! Fuck them for embarrassing you and treating you like a second-class piece-of-shit trick.' Added to this message was the information that within a few minutes after I'd gone the other man - the rich Japanese guy - would be licking and kissing Sandy, fingering her pussy; maybe even feeling her tongue on his buttohole. I began to experience a wrenching in my stomach accompanied by the bite of something sour in my throat.

I looked over at Sandy. Then at the face of the partition lady and then over at the big tipper. It didn't matter any more. None of it. Fuck it!

I stood up and unzipped my pants and pulled out my dick. Sandy stood up too. They looked surprised but no one did anything because they didn't know what to do.

First I urinated on the couch where I'd been sitting, then I twisted my stream to the floor by Sandy's feet. She stepped back. Then I pissed on the coffee table and the magazines.

When I was done I zipped up and walked out, slamming the door behind me.

Two blocks down Broadway there was a ginmill off the corner of Forty-fifth. A spot where during the day you could get one-for-one until 5 p.m. It was hot outside and the Clint Eastwood movie didn't start for at least another hour.

I went in, found an empty stool and put a twenty-dollar bill face up on the deck. I ordered three shooters with a beer back. The bar guy had the Yankees on. New York at Baltimore. Third inning. The goddamn Orioles were already ahead six to one.

He set up my beer and whiskey and I tried my first sip in almost three weeks. It was awful, like the taste of cigarette ashes in an inch of water at the bottom of a glass. Stale. Stabbing. Heinous. A taste completely unlike any whiskey of any kind.

I knew it was the hypnotism. Some fucked saboteur reprogramming message Harry had pumped into the depths of my brain through the earphones.

I didn't know what else to do so I hammered the rest of the shooters and gulped down a swig of the beer. It was rank shit too. Disgusting. Like kerosene or liquid rat poison or dwarf piss. Awful.

I waved for the guy and when he came over I switched to vodka shooters, plain water back.

He set me up again and I hit the first sip hoping the vodka would at least taste different from the whiskey. But it didn't. It was the same. I tried the water. Only it seemed uncontaminated.

When I'd finished the drinks I ordered more. My head pounded and my heart raced like the way you feel when you've just mainlined half a gram of coke.

The second vodka shooter wasn't as bad as the first. Like before, like rancid wet ashes but not quite as bad.

It took another fifteen minutes and two more sets of shooters until the stuff tasted halfway normal.

Then I was okay again.

I continued going to the hypno because I had to in order to stay qualified to receive my Workman's Comp checks. But I kept on with the booze too. I just didn't tell Harry. The adjustment was simple: on the days I had my sessions I'd hold off getting drunk until after I left his office.

Chapter Twenty-five

I STARTED TO become a more frequent visitor at Bert's downstairs manager's apartment. We were both sports fans and his most recent and prized possession was a big-screen TV - a forty-six-inch job he'd confiscated in lieu of back rent. Sometimes it happened that when a roomer got locked out or vacated suddenly, Bert would procure his belongings: a racing bike, boom-box radios, a computer. Sometimes he'd sell the stuff if it was electronic, sometimes he'd give it to one of his kids, and sometimes he'd lock it in his storage room in the basement. Bert excelled at fist fights which helped if the ex-tenant returned for his stuff and began complaining regarding who was entitled to what.

Angel-Lee was working nights waitressing at her titty-bar job and Bert knew I followed the Yankees and Mets and liked boxing so I had an open invitation to drop in. I was okay. We'd sip Bert's beer and watch the game on his monster TV. Sometimes during the commercials he'd mute the sound and dispense advice about my case and brag about outsmarting the Workman's Comp people and the welfare department.

It would be me and Bert and the twins, Carrie and Connie. After the girls fixed dinner and did the dishes they would confine themselves to their big bed in the rear area of the apartment. They had learned to keep a low profile around their daddy when he drank, which was mostly day and night. He could easily become a mean-spirited and belittling prick when it came to criticizing his wife and kids.

The twins liked having me around. I'd make up preposterous yarns about their favorite TV actor or rock star and say he was my cousin or I went to school with him or I'd once driven him to the airport in my cab. When they would challenge me I'd concoct a personality characteristic or a tattoo the guy had and go on about it until they were convinced that I was really telling the truth. Then I'd make a face to let them know that I'd fooled them again. Then too, me being in their apartment made it easier with their dad because it took some of the heat off.

Bert's three-year Workman's Comp lawsuit finally got settled and the amount came out to be forty thousand dollars. Robert Edward Francis Duffy took his one-third off the top which was the agreed split but Bert was left with almost twenty-seven K, which, according to him and Bob Duffy, was a decent hit.

He celebrated by staying drunk and snorting coke and vanishing from the building for seventy-two hours. After he sobered up and got contrite he bought rollerblade rollerskates for his girls and a pearl necklace for beautiful Angel-Lee.

One morning several days after the check was safely in his bank, I accompanied Bert to the OTB on Broadway. It was not yet 10 a.m. but he was half drunk and snorting crack again.

He wasn't much of a gambler and due to his coke and booze problem his relationship with his family had gotten worse. The next day when he came to with a new hangover he discovered that Angel was gone and his savings account was at zero balance.

She'd had enough. It turned out that her and Tall Jimmy, the bartender at her job, had been having a thing and what was left of the settlement cash had provided them with the motivation to relocate together to the southwest.

Bert stayed drunk and high on coke for another week, ignoring his manager's job and his kids. When he was completely broke and his credit was gone, he started in on wine. The girls, in fear of their dad, came up to my room. At night they slept on my floor in their sleeping bags.

Chapter Twenty-six

IT WAS RAINING so I had my jacket on and I was on my way out to a hypno appointment with Harry when I opened my door and saw Bert moving the twins' mattress and two boxfuls of clothes up the stairs.

He was real bad: shaking, hung over, his dick in the dirt. But he had a plan.

Angel's welfare check had just come in the mail; two hundred and ninety-seven dollars. Bert had signed his wife's name on the back and cashed the check at the liquor store on Ninth Avenue where they knew him. He handed the wadded up allotment money over to me. Mostly all twenties.

That morning he had quit his manager's job. He was setting out to find Angel and bring her back. Part of his plan was for me to look after the girls for a couple of weeks.

I watched him shake, then took the money. Together with the girls we moved the mattress and the boxes the rest of the way into my room.

But Bert was gone longer than two weeks and my own checks were barely enough to cover expenses. It was almost a month before we even received a call on the hall pay phone. Two hundred and sixty of the two hundred and ninety-seven dollars had gone out immediately to pay for an emergency room visit when I came home buzzed, tripped going up the stairs, and hit my forehead on the banister. Twelve stitches.

I had the key to the building's storage room and Bert's permission, if necessary, to sell or pawn his stuff, whatever was there. Twice that first month the girls and I had to appropriate one of D'Agostino Market's shopping carts and wheel a load down Ninth Avenue to the hock shop. First thing was their dad's big TV and speakers, then a VCR and a fax machine with the dial buttons missing.

There was more stuff but when Ed Dorobek, the new rooming-house manager, discovered me going into the storage room, he replaced the padlock. I was denied further admittance unless Bert was present.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I KNEW EXACTLY nothing about eleven-year-old girls.

It was summer. The end of June. Having twin girls around, out of school, in and out of my room, was annoying at first. The up side was that with less time by myself my drinking and my mind's raging and crazy self-talking stayed pretty much under control. They were good kids so I made the adjustment. The hardest thing for me was the heat at night and not sleeping.

During the day I maintained on cheap whiskey and the occasional short dog of Mad Dog 20-20. I worked on my play as much as I could, and I always kept my appointments with Harry.

Sometimes, in those first weeks after the girls moved in, the sweltering afternoons were so fierce that sitting around in the closeness of the rooming house induced my brain's software to thoughts of suicide and homicide. My solution was for the three of us to walk to Times Square to play video games or go to the \$2 air cooled movies on Forty-second Street.

The twins would skate down Broadway on their rollerblades with me following. They were heartbreakers, always cheerful, friendly to everybody, with beautiful smiles and big eyes like their mom's. The tourists and the people on the street loved them.

The only real children's book I owned was *The Wonderful Wizard Of Oz*. At night Carrie was having bad dreams, being terrorized by spiders and two-foot-high red insects sucking her face off while she slept so, before lights out, to get her and Connie to relax and drift off, I began reading out loud from Oz. One chapter a night. They loved it. Right away the magic of the story had us all under its spell. When I'd get tired or too drunk to do a good job with the reading, one of the girls would take over. It became a nightly ritual.

Then our finances got worse and I had to pawn my electric typewriter and my own TV to raise money for food. I'd fallen two weeks behind on

the rent for the second time. Dorobek, the manager, a jeweled scumbag at heart, exalted in his moment of victory by sneering as he delivered a pink, legal, three-day eviction slip to our room.

It was the next morning, early, when we heard a noise - the girls heard it. It woke them up. A scratching and a sort of whimpering drifted up from below, through our room's two big open windows by the fire escape, then skidded across to their sleeping bags. The source appeared to be the garbage cans outside the first floor that Dorobek kept stacked near the rooming house's entrance.

The girls shook me awake wanting permission to go downstairs to investigate.

Six kittens were the origin of the disturbance. Gray tabbies. The entire litter less than a week old. They'd been dispatched by their passing owner in a brown, taped-up grocery bag, then dumped in one of the heavy metal garbage cans. A cowardly act. And maybe a fatal crime too except that the perp lacked the balls to smother his victims by sealing the can's lid.

The cats were orphans like the twin girls who would save them from the trash. Abandoned Munchkins. I never had a chance to say no.

Having more new roommates only worsened the financial deal. We were nearly penniless. My next Workman's Comp check was still four days away and it had been weeks since their dad's last phone call.

I decided to convene a house meeting. Each of us took a pen and paper and wrote down suggestions; every way we could think of to bring in some money. Connie acted as recording secretary for the best ideas.

We were unanimous. The proposal we all chose as number one was the one that would provide immediate cash. My idea. A street hustle. A way to use the twins' personalities and little-girl appeal to mooch the New York tourists. I was sure it would work.

The story I made up for them was simple; the girls would say that their mom and dad had just been in a car wreck. The parents were driving back to the city from a weekend trip visiting family upstate. They'd run into a sleet storm on the thruway in their old Ford wagon with the bald tires. The car slid across the roadway head-on into a retaining wall. Both Mom and Dad were in the hospital in Albany. ICU. One (they chose their mom) had a punctured eye and grievous internal organ damage. She might also never

walk again. But Dad was much worse off. A coma. Over the phone the ER doctor had mentioned the prospect of aneurism and extensive brain damage.

The scam went as follows: the twins would work their way up and down Broadway and Seventh Avenue in Times Square stopping to pitch anyone who was well dressed or looked like an out-of-towner. They'd act upset and show a palm-full of crushed bills, ones and fives, saying all they needed was twenty-two dollars and eight cents more to have enough money to catch the six o'clock (or four-thirty or two-fifteen or whatever) Greyhound leaving from the Port Authority Bus Terminal for upstate. It was vital that they get to the Albany hospital ICU as soon as possible to see their dad for maybe the last time before he went into the probably-fatal brain operation. Carrie, always the more dramatic of the two, volunteered to be the one to start out doing the pitch. Connie would back her up with nods and whimpers. When they both got good at presenting the hustle, they'd switch off.

The twins loved it. The only adjustment I had to make was allowing them to use their rollerblades instead of walking.

We spent three hours that night, between chasing kittens, flattening out the details. I pre-asking all the questions I could think of that the tourists might have. We rehearsed everything. Carrie wanted to use the name Dorothy and take one of the kittens along and call it Toto. Connie and I vetoed the idea. Her tendency was to overdramatize. By the third dry run she'd already taught herself a way to sob and tear-up every time she or Connie used the word 'aneurism.'

The next morning at eleven o'clock, check-out time at the mid-town Manhattan hotels, the girls began skating around Times Square going up to anyone who appeared to be a mooch or an out-of-towner with luggage.

It was a strong scam. Sometimes the kids raked in as much as two hundred a day. Twenties and tens. The tourists and the mid-town shirt-and-tie crowd were unable to say no to twins in pigtails.

Chapter Twenty-eight

WE HAD BEEN through *The Wonderful Wizard Of Oz* three or four times. I'd tried to introduce other stuff, some Brontë, Margaret Mitchell, even some creepy Ann Rice but they would have none of it. Oz was too powerful. And, of course, the kittens were living proof of the existence of Munchkins.

Most days, in the afternoons, after their Times Square hustle, because of the sopping heat, we'd walk cross-town to our rooming house on Fifty-first Street, pick up the cardboard TV crate with the holes in it where they housed their kittens, mount the box on a supermarket shopping cart, then roll up Eighth Avenue to Central Park. I'd count the day's cash while the girls played with the kittens and had a contest to see who could eat the most Eskimo Pies and Orange Sherbet push-ups. They'd made a rule for me. It was based on an incident I'd had with an asshole clerk at the video arcade. I'd argued and gotten punched and inadvertently misplaced a hundred dollars in cash. The rule was: no wine drinking in public.

We met Elizabeth in Central Park. She was pushing a stroller along the walkway. The twins ogled anything that was a baby, anything in a diaper, so meeting her was as unavoidable as breathing smog.

Her job was being the full-time nanny to a baby named Sven, the eighteen-month-old son of a European magazine CEO guy who lived in the Essex House on Central Park South for four months out of every year. Sven had a seven-year-old brother named Erik. He had a spinal disease and stayed at home at the apartment most of the time with his mother while Elizabeth spent the afternoons wheeling baby Sven around in the park.

Elizabeth was Cuban. From a town outside Havana. She was smart and spoke decent American. Twenty years old and she had already had three children of her own that she'd left with her mother back on the island. Elizabeth was a bit overweight and she had sad eyes but the twins, who

were always good at deciding such matters, liked her right away. And Elizabeth's smile was like a beam from Venus.

It turned out that she loved whiskey too.

After the first day or two, the two of us sat on a long bench, laughing and sipping Ten-High out of Coca-Cola cups while Carrie and Connie played with Sven and the kittens on the grass.

By the end of the week I'd asked Elizabeth in her white nanny uniform with the white panty hose and two-tone oxford shoes if she'd like to take an hour off and go for a short cab ride with me back to my rooming house to look at a poem I was writing honoring Carmen Miranda and Fidel Castro. It made her laugh. She took a big hit from her Coca-Cola cup and then smiled her remarkable smile.

We left Sven and the Munchkins in the care of the twins.

At the rooming house, when we began fucking, Elizabeth made her pussy clamp down on my dick as if she'd decided to keep it inside her body forever.

A few afternoons later, we'd been madly humping and rolling around for half an hour, when I heard the floor creak across the room. I looked up and saw the twins standing a few feet from the bed. They'd been watching.

Connie talked first. 'That's sex, right? Intercourse? You guys are having sex.'

'Right,' I yelled. 'Correct. Go away!'

'And that's what happens? That's how you do it? You climb on her and then you both push and grunt?'

'Pretty much. We're not done yet. Go away!'

The girls looked at each other, then back over at the naked bodies of me and Elizabeth, then back at each other. They both yelled 'Yuck' at the same time.

Chapter Twenty-nine

THE FIRST WEEK of September, a week after Elizabeth and Sven and the Swedish magazine family had left town, we got a letter from Bert. He and Angel were back together at a motel outside Boulder. The insurance settlement money was long gone but so was Tall Jimmy. The twins' daddy had been sober, off coke and in an out-patient program, for over a month. Angel was dancing again and Bert had found himself a night watchman job.

In the letter there was a money order for three hundred dollars, enough for bus fare and expenses for the twins to join their parents in Colorado.

The next day was a Tuesday. Thundershowers all morning. Big fat drops. Their Trailways bus was scheduled to depart at one o'clock that afternoon so they got me up early. I sipped beer until my shaking stopped, then helped them pack their stuff into cardboard boxes. They would have to leave their kittens with me until their parents got a big enough place for everybody. Leaving them was the hardest thing either of the girls had ever done.

At the International House Of Pancakes on Broadway we ordered the restaurant's biggest pancake deal with a tall orange juice for each of us and a milkshake back. After breakfast we walked to Seventh Avenue and waited for passing cabs until we found a Checker because a Checker was the only taxi big enough to handle all the boxes.

When we got to Port Authority I located a shipping guy with a dolly who helped us arrange to send their stuff. Then we played video games until it was time to walk to the gate to wait for their bus to depart.

Of the two girls Carrie was my favorite. She had always reminded me of myself when I was her age; emotional, impulsive, more outgoing than her sister but more self-conscious too.

When the bus driver opened the doors and the kids were ready to get on, we hugged goodbye. I'd given them *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* to

keep them company on the trip.

Carrie was crying. She got back off the bus and ran up to me and hugged me again. It was hard for us both to let go. Then she handed me back the book. 'You take it,' she said. 'Promise me you'll find Oz.'

Out on the street after the bus left it had stopped raining. It was ten blocks back to my room. I had a pocket full of money and I could have taken a cab, but I decided to walk. The rain had cooled things off.

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